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OR, Little Lightning's Invincibles.

A Romance of Yellow Dust City.

BY JOHN W. OSBON,

AUTHOR OF "ROYAL RICHARD, THE THOROUGH-
BRED," "POWDER PHIL, THE BOY MINER,"
"THE ROYAL GIANTS OF NOWHAR,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

LITTLE LIGHTNING.

"Sh! Thar's the major, now! Look, pard,
but don't—don't, fer be'ving's sake!—put a straw
in his way! Ye may call yerself a purty good
leetle man, but—"

The speaker filled the hiatus with a significant
toss of his head.

"He is an ugly-looking customer, uncle."

THE TRAMP CAME TO A SUDDEN HALT NEAR THE CENTER OF THE ROOM, WHEELING
UPON HIS TORMENTORS WITH THE FIERCENESS OF A TIGER AT BAY.

"Ugly? Ugly es orriginal sin, thet's all! Don't rile 'im, boyee!"

"Ketch me!" laughed the youth, with a careless shrug of his broad shoulders. "I've seen this paragon of Yellow Dust—that's all I want! No scrap, no funeral, if you please!"

"Ye're right, Keene—an' ye, too, kid," interpolated a husky voice, that of a short, stocky fellow just behind the two. "Fight shy ov Major Menace!"

"Orthodox Pete, the presiding genius of the stage!" exclaimed the youth, half-aloud, as he glanced quickly over his shoulder.

"Ya-as, Orthodox Pete, leetle sport," was the response. "Et's jest as I told ye down ther Rocky Bar trail ter-day—at must be an old-timer ter do bizness 'ith ther major 'thout burnin' his fingers."

"Thet's ther straight goods, Pete," asseverated Old Man Keene, turning until his elbows rested upon the railing of the bar, his sharp tones sinking almost to a whisper as his glittering black eyes shifted to the Jehu's honest face. "I didn't kalkilate ter say et in public, but et's said an' I'll stick to et, I reckon! Nuther uv us keer ter see a likely younker cleaned ov his pile or cut down in ther bloom ov his youth, eh?"

"I don't, fer sure! An' sech a thing might happen, ef ther boyee warn't warned! Whar ye see one ov his jumps, look out fer ther devil hisself!"

Old Man Keene turned pale; but into his darkly-glittering orbs leaped an ominous light.

"I don't jest ketch yer drift, Orthodox," he enunciated, his hands slipping swiftly down upon the butts of his revolvers. "Ef ye mean anything pussonal—"

"Thanks, awfully, ye dear ole geese!" broke in the mellow voice of the youth, just then, as he turned from a careless survey of the Monumental to face his companions, apparently unconscious of the portending trouble between them. "Thanks, awfully, I say! As if I had a pile, or carried a chip on my shoulder."

"Steer cl'ar ov Major Menace an' ther Monumental, anyway, my lad," advised Orthodox, in steady tones. "Sech 'sociations es we find hyar aire none too good fer ther toughest ov us."

"Good advice, thet!" Old Man Keene chimed in, with an ill-concealed sneer.

"Good enough, I reckon," admitted the youth, his midnight eyes meeting the crossed orbs of the Jehu with a steady glow. "Such advice as a father might give to a son, and therefore not to be despised."

"But I must confess that I am interested in this Major Menace. Who is he? What is he?"

"Ther devil's imp—a stony-hearted gambler, ther owner ov ther Monumental," returned Orthodox, almost sharply. "Thet is es much es ther most ov us know ov him. Sum' thar be who c'u'd tell more—ef they dared!"

Old Man Keene turned to the bar and called for a drink. There was a dark look upon his smooth face—a look that boded ill to the outspoken Jehu.

The youth gazed across the room at Major Menace. The gambler was standing at a table, the light above which shone full and clear upon his face.

A strange face—a face once seen not forgotten. The features were without fault; the eyes were a deep, dark-blue; hair and mustaches, jet-black and curling; but the skin was a dead-white hue; the smile upon the thin lips was a wolfish one; and below the left eye was a livid X-shaped scar, extending well down into the cheek.

The major was well-dressed, and well-armed, too, though his weapons were kept out of sight except when in actual use.

But, neither silk hat nor spotless linen, the tailor's art nor the flash of diamonds, could mask his character; the fellow was a villain, and there was an intangible something in his visage that at once betrayed the fact.

"Major Menace! An odd cognomen, but well chosen," mused the youth.

"Right, lad," echoed Orthodox, catching the words. "He's a menace ter ther camp an' every honest critter in it. An' he'd 'a' gone, long ago, but fer his standin' hand-in-glove with ther Saints—blast 'em!"

"The Mormons, eh?"

"A tool fer 'em, pard, es I hes reason ter know," was the guarded, yet dogged, reply. "Ask ole Jim—"

The Jehu paused; an expectant hush had come over the crowd—a silence so intense as to render his last three words distinctly audible throughout the room.

Just a breath—the keen, pistol-like crack of a whip; then—

"G'lang!"

"Gee ha-aw! ye mis'abul pirate! Gee ha-aw! or I'll lash yer measly carcass inter ribbons!"

Again the vicious report of the whip rung out, followed this time by a howl of pain, and the swinging door of the Monumental was violently flung open, to admit a singular-looking object.

A man—a short, fat, greasy-looking fellow, whose coarse hair and beard were of a fiery red, shaggy and unkempt; whose nondescript garb hung in tatters upon his bulky form, covered with clinging particles of earth and reddened in spots by the blood following the strokes of the cruel lash.

A tramp—a genuine bum.

A few paces behind him, each tugging away at a lariat noosed around the body of his victim, each plying whip, came two stout fellows, from their dress miners.

His blue eyes glowing luridly, his breath escaping with a hissing sound, the tramp came to a sudden halt near the center of the room, wheeling upon his tormentors with the fierceness of a tiger at bay.

But he was powerless. The lariats held his arms, and his tormentors circled warily about, pulling him hither and thither at will.

"Rico Rube an' Peet Brown—two ov ther camp's toughest," muttered Orthodox, as the inmates of the Monumental began to press forward. "Mighty leetle show ther pore devil 'ill git fer his white alley!"

A peculiar look had crept into the dark, handsome face of the youth. For just a moment he seemed about to spring forward; then his expression changed, and he looked inquiringly into the crooked eyes of the Jehu.

"Wait!" warned that worthy, with a covert glance over his shoulder at Old Man Keene. "Et's a crooked move—mebbe they'll flash their hand, by an' by."

"Stiddy, critter!" cried the larger of the ruffians, Rico Rube, just then, with a savage jerk at his lariat. "I kin tell ye ye aire not wanted hyar, an' I reckon when ye git a leetle reason inter yer noddle ye won't keer ter tarry. Jes' slap yer berdered optics onter that notice ag'in' ther wall over thar, an' then say ef ye'll scoot!"

"Slap—nothin'!" panted the tramp, fairly bristling with rage. "I've squatted in this hyar camp ov Yaller Dust ter stay, an' et's nary scoot, ye—"

"Easy, my man!" interrupted Major Menace, softly yet warningly, moving forward at that juncture.

"And now, Rube, what's the trouble?"

"Trouble enough, major!" returned the desperado, irascibly. "Ther critter's a cussed bum—an' ye know ther law ov Yaller Dust!"

"The heathen Chinees, all bums and tin-horn sports must go," greeted the major, from the scrawling notice just beyond him.

"But I'm eternally busted ef I'm a Chinees, a bum or a tin-horn sport!" vigorously protested the captive.

"I'm a thoroughbred red-shirt, with a record runnin' back ter ther year '49, an' I'm open ter swing a pick or swap lead with any galoot yer camp kin scare up."

"Putty durned thin—thet!" sneered Pete Brown.

"Major, we caught ther cuss a-skulkin' in ther bresh back ov our quarters, an' et's dollars ter doughnuts no square man w'u'd be found in sech a place arter nightfall!"

At this announcement an ominous murmur ran through the Monumental.

"Looks like a fu'st-class sneak-thief!" Old Man Keene remarked, and the words were speedily indorsed by a score utterances of similar purport.

"Go slow, boys!" continued Major Menace, with a deprecatory movement of his jeweled hand. "Give the fellow all the show in the world. I reckon he'll quit the camp."

"I'll do nothin' ov ther sort!" doggedly asseverated the captive, glaring fiercely at the white-faced sport. "I kem ter stay, an' I reckon I won't move!"

"Suppose some of you go for Mayor Grim," suggested the major, glancing over the crowd. "Either he or Marshal Pepper should be able to drill a little horse-sense into this fellow's noddle."

"Speak ov ther Old Boy! Thar's Red Pepper, now," Peet Brown exclaimed, as a tall, lank individual with red hair and a long beard of like color strode into the room.

"Ho, Pepper! Ye're jest in time! Hyer's a case fer ye, an' don't ye fergit et!" and the desperado hastily narrated the event of the evening.

"An' ther critter sw'ars he won't budge, eh?" exclaimed Marshal Pepper, in a shrill, rasping voice, when Brown had finished.

"Thet's w'ot!" declared Rico Rube, grinning viciously. "Mebbe he'd move, though, ef we guv him a sample ov ther same medicine he's bin a-takin'."

"We'll see," grunted Pepper, squaring himself before the captive.

"W'ot ye got to say fer yerself, critter?"

"Nary scoot!" iterated the bum, sententiously. "I'm down on my luck just now, but I'm square. I've hoofed et all ther way from Frisco, over ther line, an' I've made up my mind ter hang up in Yaller Dust jest es long es thar's an ounce ov silver in her mines. Ye heur me! I'm Ole Bill Williams, I am, an' I kin swing a pick with ther naixt one!"

"Thet settles it!" Marshal Pepper said, as if thoroughly convinced. "Trot 'im down ther trail a hafe-mile, pards, tech 'im up a leetle, an' turn 'im loose. Ef he moseys back ter Yaller Dust, he'll git w'ot he oughter hev—a rope!"

"Thet's ther talk!" exclaimed Rico Rube, tightening his grip on the lariat.

"G'lang, critter!"

At that instant the youth at the end of the bar threw off Orthodox Pete's detaining hand, and sprung forward, his hands closing tightly around the butts of the serviceable-looking revolvers at his middle.

"Hold!" he cried, halting between Rico Rube and the door. "Marshal Pepper, ye're crowdin' things with a vengeance! I can tell ye Old Bill Williams is straight goods, an' I reckon I ought to know!"

For just an instant the marshal seemed astounded. Then into his bloodshot eyes crept a tiny flame.

"Oh, he is, is he!" he sneered. "An' who in blazes aire *you*?"

"I'm called Little Lightning, an' I can shoot as straight as I can talk!" was the significant reply.

CHAPTER II.

IN LIMBO.

For a moment, the Marshal of Yellow Dust stared in open-mouthed wonder at the bold youth. In the expressive vernacular of the camp, "he was knocked all ov a heap."

And the worst of it was, he was completely at a loss how to proceed.

"Ther kid is fixed ter ketch ther drop on me, an' I'll bet a horse he's ole bizness with his tools!" was the thought that flashed through the brain of Marshal Pepper. "A bluff won't work—I must try strategy."

"Two ter one on ther bantam!" exclaimed Orthodox Pete, his homely but honest face aglow with satisfaction. "Oh, my! but he's a screamer!"

Nor was the Jehu alone in his outspoken admiration.

After that first faint ripple of astonishment, however, all became silent, and every eye turned to the youthful sport.

A dashing fellow he was, truly, of lithe yet muscular form, with a face dark from long exposure, yet clear and ruddy, smooth and firm, and eyes as black as midnight, hair of jetty hue, long and waving.

His clothing was of buckskin, fringed and beaded but well worn. A repeating rifle hung at his back, and in his girdle rested a brace of heavy revolvers and a bowie.

All in all, a personage at first glance effeminate, yet bold as a lion, with the wariness of a fox.

"Some dare-devil young plainsman!" muttered Major Menace, his cold blue eyes turning to the marshal. "And may I be dashed if Pepper hasn't put his foot in it!"

And that worthy, as has been noted, was painfully aware of the fact.

A full minute passed, during which the red-bearded desperado succeeded in partially regaining his equanimity; then the door was opened, and into the Monumental strode no less a personage than Grim—Gideon Grim—mayor of the camp.

A short, stocky old man, dressed in ministerial but seedy black, and of girth approaching the Falstaffian, was "his Honor," and his patriarchal beard, and long white hair, his mild, spectacled blue eyes and beaming face, lent him an expression most benevolent.

"We'll not quarrel, younker," exclaimed Marshal Red Pepper, curtly. "Thar's ther mayor, an' I reckon he kin look inter ther matter, an' fix et up 'bout right. What say?"

"If it suits Bill, it suits me," Little Lightning replied laconically.

"That's ther talk!" cried the bum, with a broad grin. "Lay on Macduff! A fair show an' no favor aire all Bill Williams axes!"

At that moment Gideon Grim reached the outskirts of the crowd.

"What's the racket, boys?" he demanded, in an asthmatic voice, as he pushed his way toward the center. "What is it, I say? Somebody fixed for plantin'?"

And then, as he caught sight of Rico Rube and Pete Brown and their captive, he halted, staring first at one, then another, of the trio over the rim of his glasses.

"What's the meaning of this outrageous scene, Marshal Pepper?" he cried, indignantly.

"Meanin' enough!" gritted Rico Rube, half-savagely, half-fearfully. "I reckon, Mr. Grim, we'd orter see'd ye first, but ye warn't ter be found—an' that's ther plain, unvarnished truth!"

"Ther critter aire a durned thievin' bum, yer Honor," Peet Brown hastened to say, with a nod at the captive. "We ketched 'im hidin' in ther bresh back ov our shebang, an' we're only follerin' ther law."

"Law be hanged! You fellows haven't the first idea of law!" grunted the mayor, in disgust.

"What you got to say, marshal? I'm waiting to hear from you."

"Nothin'," Pepper replied. "Peet and Rube hev told ye all I know. But I reckon ther critter had better move on ter sum other man's camp."

At that juncture, Major Menace stepped forward, saying:

"It appears to me, Grim, that the course suggested by Marshal Pepper would be a little hasty. The man may be all right, and he may not. Give him a chance, say I."

"Certainly, major," blandly acquiesced the mayor; "that is my idea exactly. Always give a man a chance for his white alley. Now, my dear fellow, what can you say for yourself?" and he turned abruptly to the captive bum.

The broad grin that came over Bill Williams's face gave it a grotesque look.

But he repeated the statement made to Pepper, affirming with due earnestness that he was plainly and simply a miner seeking employment; and, as before, Little Lightning vouched for the truth of the statement.

Gideon shook his head dubiously, and after a moment of deliberation said:

"To tell the truth, gentlemen, I more than half believe you; but you are both strangers here, and the means to substantiate your statements are not at hand. It is my unvarying rule to thoroughly investigate all such cases, and therefore I shall have to commit you to the lockup for safe keeping until two o'clock to-morrow afternoon."

Little Lightning's face turned first red, then white, as he listened to the mayor's pompous strains.

"Am I to understand that I am under arrest?" he asked.

"You certainly are, my youthful friend."

"On what charge?"

"You are a witness in this case, and therefore must be locked up for safe-keeping."

"But I am friendly to the cause of the defendant, and would certainly appear in his behalf."

Mayor Grim looked over his glasses with an air of owlish wisdom.

"Very true, perhaps; but these are troublous times in Yellow Dust, and a witness in hoc is worth a score at large," he observed.

"Rico Rube, you and Pete Brown unharness the galoot; and you, Marshal Pepper, do your duty."

Again there was a surging and swaying of the crowd, with here a murmur of approval, there an expletive expression of dissatisfaction.

Little Lightning's slender brown hands closed just a trifle more tightly around the butts of his weapons, and he braced himself as if for a struggle; then his eyes met those of Bill Williams, and his hands dropped to his sides, in token of submission.

Major Menace was quick to note the exchange of glances.

Sullenly enough, Rico Rube and Pete Brown removed their lariats, and Marshal Red Pepper, reinforced by three men deputized from the crowd, marched away with the prisoners.

In the mean time, a peculiar smile just parting his bearded lips, Orthodox Pete had watched the varying phases of the singular affair much as a cat watches a rat-hole.

The Jehu, it may be remarked in passing, was a recent addition to the population of Yellow Dust; but during the three weeks he had been at the camp his eyes had not been idle.

Mayor Gideon Grim followed the marshal and his posse from the gambling-house, and a

moment later, Rico Rube and his pard skulked away.

"Now for Old Man Keene," muttered Orthodox.

But that personage had disappeared.

Again that peculiar smile flitted across the face of the Jehu, and into his twisted orbs came a fire.

Unobserved he left the Monumental, and took his way southward along the rough street running lengthwise of the camp.

Fifty yards ahead, just discernible in the starlight, were the objects of his solicitude, Rico Rube and Pete Brown.

On toward the outskirts of the camp, with noiseless steps, they hurried, keeping to the darker side of the street, as if anxious to avoid notice.

After them, with all the stealth and cunning of a red-skin, stole Orthodox Pete.

At the last cabin on the street the desperadoes halted, and, after a wary survey of their surroundings, pushed open the door and entered.

"Easy, boyees," came the voice of Old Man Keene from the gloomy interior. "Shut ther door, an' I'll turn on the light."

Even as he spoke the door was closed, and the next instant the rays of a lamp dispelled the gloom.

"Sot down, pards," continued Keene, in the same cautious tones, as he helped himself to a seat at the rude table in the center of the room.

"Sot down an' onbosom yerselves."

"Wot's ther racket with ther fat pilgrim, enyhow?"

"A racket ov ther wu'st kind," averred Rico Rube, with a grimace that disclosed his yellow fangs. "Ther greasy cuss aire a spy!"

"A spy!" echoed Old Keene, visibly surprised and amazed.

"Yas, a spy! Pete an' me ketched 'im with his ear ter a crack in ther near wall ov our shanty," pursued Rube.

"But afore he c'u'd heur a durned thing," Pete Brown put in.

"Yas, we hed jest sot down ter fix up a scheme ter git holt ov ther gal, when we lit onter ther cuss."

"But if he heard nothin', why this hyer pow-wow?" Keene demanded, suspiciously.

"Ye must see ter et ther critter don't stay in ther camp—that's all," said Rube. "He heerd nuthin', but we don't know wot he suspects, an' ef he played ther spy onc't, he'd do et ag'in."

"That's true enough," nodded the Old Man.

"We'd 'a' done fer 'im fast enough," Pete Brown declared, his voice sinking to a whisper, "on'y we didn't know how many more sech cusses thar might be round; an' es things hed ter seem fair an' reg'lar, we jest trotted 'im down ter ther Monumental."

"Ther best thing ye c'u'd 'a' done," averred Keene, with knitted brow. "On'y—ef Gid Grim hed 'a' took one ov his cranky notions ye'd both 'a' gone inter limbo with ther two galoots an' hev sp'ilt ther bull racket."

For a moment the two ruffians seemed startled.

"Tain't too late yit!" exclaimed Rico Rube.

"Keep out ov his way," advised Old Man Keene, smiling grimly.

"But now you fellers hed better scut. I've got bizness up-town, an' I reckon we don't keer ter be seen together. Do yer work, an' ther dust is yours at daylight ter-morrow."

Without further parley, Rico and his ally left the cabin. Old Man Keene followed a moment later.

Straight to the St. George, the principal hotel of the camp, went the wily old rascal, there passing through the office and ascending to the second floor, where he halted at the door of an apartment facing the street.

A short, dry cough, then a key clicked in the lock, and the door opened, revealing the white face of Major Menace.

Old Man Keene glided into the room.

Seated at a table, bottle and glass in hand, was Gideon Grim, the Mayor of Yellow Dust.

"Hallo! hallo!" he exclaimed, his eyes beaming with satisfaction. "You are punctual to the minute."

"It's a way the Old Man has," remarked the major, as he and Keene drew up to the table.

"Yas, siree! I make et a p'int ter do bizness right up ter ther han'le," averred the shrewd old double-face with a leer. "Tell me wot ye want done, an' I'll tell my price."

Major Menace and the mayor exchanged a swift glance.

"Go ahead!" muttered the gambler. "I reckon he can be trusted."

Grim drained his glass, then turned it bottom

upward on the table. Leaning forward, his blue eyes fairly blazing above the gold bows of his spectacles, he asked:

"How much is a man's life worth?"

Old Keene closed one eye reflectively.

"Pends on who ther cuss is," he muttered at length, glancing from one to the other, his glittering black eyes aglow with an evil light. "Deal yer keerds."

Grim drew a breath of relief.

"Ther kid you were taking in tow for a sucker, we'll say," he cautiously suggested, watching the face of the thug as if he would read his lightest thought. "How much to get him out of the way, clear and clean?"

"A couple of hundred, I reckon—hafe now, hafe when done."

"Don't speak too quickly," cautioned Major Menace, just the trace of a smile showing itself on his cold face.

"All must be swift and sure; and let me tell you this Little Lightning is a dangerous customer for even you."

Old Keene uttered a contemptuous laugh.

"That may all be!" he exclaimed grimly, his black eyes snapping. "I've sot ther figgers, an' thar they stick, with ther job warranted."

"That's the talk!" assented the mayor, approvingly, as he tossed his glass and filled it from the bottle. "I'll go down and release the young reptile. Get him outside of the camp, and—"

Major Menace raised his hand warningly. A startled hush came over the trio.

A scuffle of some sort was in progress in the hallway. A moment of suspense, then the signal cough brought Menace to his feet.

With noiseless steps he crossed the room, unlocked and opened the door.

Marshal Pepper staggered into the apartment.

In his arms, limp and lifeless, lay Orthodox Pete, the Jehu!

CHAPTER III.

BOLLY THE VETERAN.

WHEN Marshal Pepper and his squad, with their prisoners, left the Monumental, they turned northward on the winding, irregular street, passing the St. George Hotel and a second gambling-house, then a long row of tents and shanties, ere they arrived at the lock-up.

"Hyar we aire," announced the red-bearded official, as he finally halted at the door of a stoutly-built cabin and knocked vigorously with the butt of a revolver.

A light step sounded within; then a bolt was drawn from its socket and the door opened, revealing the jailer—a lank, loose-jointed fellow, with matted, straw-colored hair and beard, prominent cheek-bones and ferrety little eyes.

"A brace of birds fer yer cage, Sandy Jordan," exclaimed Pepper, pushing his prisoners into the cabin. "Fine birds, wot'll take close watchin', er I'm mistaken."

"I guess ye're 'bout right thar, Red," the jailer returned, looking hard at the homely face of Bill Williams. "They do look like tough galoots—the ole one 'specially. But, ye kin bet I'm ther dandy rustler wot kin hold 'em wall! No hijinks goes with Sandy Jordan ye bet!" and he tapped the pair of forty-fours in his belt.

"That's as good es sworn to," smiled Pepper.

"Then come an' s'arch ther varlets."

"Ther cage am allers ready, but I went through it not a half-hour ago, an' ye kin put yer last ounce on et ther things aire ship-shape." the jailer declared, as he lighted an extra lamp.

"Now, shoot out yer orders, Red."

"Take ther fat cuss fu'st, Sandy."

The jailer went at his task with alacrity. Williams remained passive, quietly surveying the interior of the cabin.

The building was of hewed logs, closely boarded up inside, with a heavy partition from front to back. The outer door was provided with a wicket and stout bolts and bars, as also was the door in the partition.

There were two windows in the outer room, one front, one back, each five feet from the floor and protected with solid cross-bars and inside shutters of oak.

Rapidly Sandy Jordan emptied the pockets of the tramp, passing the articles to Marshal Pepper for inspection.

A plug of navy, a short, black pipe, a handful of smoking tobacco and a tattered copy of a Denver newspaper, three weeks old, completed the list.

"Umph! give ther truck back ter 'im," muttered the marshal, pushing aside the articles in disgust, after having helped himself pretty liberally from the navy.

"Wait!" exclaimed Jordan, a grin of delight sweeping over his sallow face. "Ef I ain't—"
An oath from Williams, the sound of cloth hastily ripped asunder, and the jailer held up a small package, neatly wrapped in a silk 'kerchief.

Marshal Pepper repressed a start of surprise. "A ticker, by thunder!" ejaculated Sandy Jordan, triumphantly.

With eager hands, the marshal removed the 'kerchief, disclosing a splendid hunting-case watch—gold.

"Singe me fer a cat! ef 'tain't Buster Mack's!" cried one of the squad, as the marshal held up the piece.

"Thar kin be no mistake 'bout thet," the official coincided. "I've see'd thet identical ticker twenty times ef once. Mighty proud ov et, Buster war, an' no money c'u'd 'a' bought et ov 'im. 'Tain't bin a week sence he refused three hundred in cold cash, an' he war broke at ther time. He started yistiddy ter hoof et 'cross ter Rocky Bar, an' pards, I reckon ther watch tells ther rest ov ther story! This 'kerchief, too, belonged ter ther pore cuss, an'— Gents, et's stained with blood!"

The announcement drew an anxious murmur from the jailer and the three deputies.

The face of Bill Williams was a picture of wrath, disgust and consternation.

Of the group, Little Lightning alone remained cool and unperturbed.

"Jordan, putt ther cuss under lock an' key," ordered the marshal; "an' guard him well. An' you fellers," he continued, turning to his deputies, "aire not ter breathe a word ov this, or ye'll answer ter me. Before this thing aire made known, I must consult with ther mayor."

Sandy Jordan at once obeyed the command, then turned to Little Lightning.

The search in this case, however, was barren of result. The only things taken from the youth were his weapons and a well-filled purse.

He, too, was thrust into the strong-room.

Then, after a brief exchange of opinions, in no wise complimentary to the prisoners, the marshal and his men withdrew.

After bolting and barring the outer doors, Sandy Jordan took up a lamp and peered through the wicket into the cell.

"Hallo, thar!" he exclaimed.

"Hallo, yerself, ye durned night-hoss!" returned Bill Williams, irascibly, as he started up from the couch in a back corner, upon which he and Little Lightning had thrown themselves.

"Better keep a civil tongue in yer head," warned the keeper of the lock-up, his discolored teeth showing in an ugly smile. "I'm goin' ter bed, I am, an' I don't want no monkey bizness in thar. Understand?"

"Thet's all right—g'long!" and the mountain tramp sunk back with a grunt of disgust.

Sandy Jordan was as good as his word. He at once turned in, and within ten minutes his rich, resonant snore was filling the cabin.

To the prisoners it was a welcome sound. Old Bill Williams raised himself upon his elbow and listened intently.

"It's ginooine an' reg'lar," he averred, with a breath of relief as he rose to a sitting posture. "Ugh! I've bin corked so long thar's mold in my throat! But, putt et thar, pard! Et warms ther cockles ov my heart ter putt eyes on ye ag'in!"

"Ditto, Bolly," returned Little Lightning, as cautiously, as he took the proffered hand.

"What doin' up hyar, masquerading as Old Bill Williams?"

"Same ole racket—arter a man. An' you?"

"Slipped into Yellow Dust, just after dark, for supplies. Ye know ther rest."

"Ye looked through my disguise. What was weak in et?"

"Your make-up was perfect; but, we've bin pards too long, Bolly, not to know ye like a book."

"An' whar aire yer pards, ther Invincibles?" demanded the mountain tramp, after a moment's silence.

"Back in ther hills, a few miles, at our mine. We've struck it rich, an' are quietly workin' our lead for all it's worth," Little Lightning replied.

"Now, thet aire good!" exclaimed Bolly, in a tone of great satisfaction. "I c'u'dn't ask anything better, ef I c'u'd jest git word ter them! But, we're in a bad box, pardner. Jest listen till I explain a bit:

"A month ago, the darter ov Jim Orndare ov ther Silver Streak, war kidnapped, an' is held fer ransom in ther sum ov \$15,000."

"A pretty snug sum," Little Lightning remarked.

"Yas, more than Orndare hes bin able ter scare up, 'thout sacrificin' ther Silver Streak, an' thet be won't do, fer et w'u'd be playin' inter ther enemy's hand."

"Ye see, this camp ov Yaller Dust is divided inter two factions or parties—Saints an' Gentiles, an' so ov ther latter Orndare is ther chief. With him out ov ther way, ther Mormons w'u'd soon be in full swing."

"As a move in thet direction, they hev stolen his gal, takin' keer, es a matter ov course, ter kiver ther steps well. But et didn't take Orndare long ter decide thet ther blow kem from ther Saints, an' I was brought inter ther case."

"Gid Grim, ther mayor, is secretly ther head ov ther Mormon gang, an' back ov him aire sech critters as Marshal Pepper, Major Menace, an' so on, an' ter thet crowd I lay ther disappearance of ther gal."

"Fer three weeks, Buster Mack, sport-at-large, I tried ter work my way inter ther confidence. No go; they w'u'dn't hev et."

"Every trick, every artifice, known ter me, hev I tried, but all ter no purpose. I am satisfied thet Grim and Company aire back ov the hull measly bizness, but I cain't prove et, nor I cain't putt my hand on ther gal."

"I was in hope this hyar last rig w'u'd give me a chaine; 'stead ov thet, I've got myself an' you, too, in a devil ov a box; fer unless I kin escape, I hev got ter make a clean show ov my hand."

A moment of silence followed the detective's hurried recital. Then Little Lightning spoke, saying:

"So far as I kin see, we're snowed-up, hard an' tight, Bolly! We can't get out of this ranch, nor can we get word to my pards, an' thatt watch you carried as Buster Mack is goin' to make a rough case ag'in' you—especially if the Saints have dropped to your game."

"Ye've got et straight as a string," was the ready response. "But I've got a pard in this hyar camp—Orthodox Pete. He's ugly as sin, but as cute as they make 'em, an' I reckon we kin look fer him ter take a hand."

"Twixt him an' Orndare, word w'u'd go ter ther sheriff at Pioche, an' thet w'u'd end our troubles so far as Gid Grim war concerned. Et'd take hustlin', but—"

A sharp rapping at the outer door interrupted the detective.

In an instant, Sandy Jordan was upon his feet, with the demand:

"Who's thar?"

"Marshal Pepper," was the reply, from without. "Open, Sandy, for I want ter see ye."

"Now look out for squalls, pard!" breathed the imprisoned detective, as the jailer moved toward the door. "This visit is not without an object—a dark one, too!"

CHAPTER IV.

A DESPERATE COHORT.

THREE more terribly astounded scoundrels than Mayor Gideon Grim, Major Menace and Old Man Keene, upon the appearance of Marshal Pepper with the senseless form of Orthodox Pete, could hardly have been found.

It was not terror at the dark crime suggested by the limp body of the Jehu. They were beyond that.

The short, sharp struggle in the corridor told its own disgusting story. They had been watched—their grim plot overheard.

Suspicion had attached itself to them and they were under espionage.

"Make sure things aire close an' tight," gritted Pepper, with a swift glance at the snugly-drawn curtains, as the door closed behind him.

"We aire watched!"

"Watched!" echoed Grim.

"He was in the hall, with his ear ter ther key-hole," continued the marshal, placing Orthodox Pete on the floor. "He fought like a devil, too, but a crack over ther cabeza with ther butt-end ov a pistol settled ther matter."

"I tell ye, pards, thet Orndare job hes brought a hull hornets' nest about our ears, an' matters aire so thet we must push, or be pushed. Et's either, a squar', stand-up fight, or back down an' vamose."

"We'll not run away," asseverated Major Menace, with his ugly smile. "We'll fix the Jehu, then talk the matter over."

"Bind and gag him, Pepper, you and Keene. You are adepts at thet sort of work. Here's the stuff."

The gambler opened his trunk as he spoke, and tossed out a quantity of cordage and an ugly-looking gag.

Marshal Pepper did not delay. In a very few minutes Orthodox Pete was pronounced secure.

"He won't move, nor he won't lisp, I'll warrant ye, till we give 'im leave," observed the doughty official, as he complacently surveyed the work of himself and Keene.

"But ther main p'int is, w'ot aire we goin' ter do with ther galoot? W'ot did he hear?"

"Before we discuss that, we had better make sure that we cannot be overheard," Gideon Grim suggested, uneasily. "Let Keene out into the hall. He can hear all thatt passes."

"A good suggestion," smiled Major Menace, again unlocking the door. "Out with you, Keene."

Their sentry posted, the three plotters seated themselves at the table, and the major disclosed the plot against Little Lightning.

"Pooh! Ther cub amounts ter very little!" exclaimed Pepper, in contempt. "He's got ther sand, but when that's said, all's said. He knows nothin'."

"Don't be too sure of that," Menace protested. "I know this Little Lightning of old. He is the chief of a band of young dare-devils known as the Prairie Invincibles. If he is here, they are not far away."

"Wa-al?"

"What more likely than that they are in the employ of Orndare?"

Pepper stroked his long red beard reflectively.

"Mebbe ye're right," he muttered; "but ther tramp, Bill Williams, worries me more than a dozen sech kids."

"Do ye know, pards, thet thet fat cuss aire none other than Bolly Darrit, ther Sleuth-hound ov ther Mountains?"

Both Major Menace and Gideon Grim sprung to their feet.

"You are right!" cried the gambler, explosively. "The appearance of Little Lightning proves it! They are pards!"

"Ther deuce they aire!" Pepper exclaimed.

"Can it be?" echoed the mayor.

"It is a fact," assured Major Menace, his white face growing livid. "They work hand-in-glove, and a keener pair of sleuth-hounds is not to be found in all the West!"

For fully a minute the three plotters stared blankly at each other, mute with consternation and disgust.

"And that fellow?" sputtered Grim, at length, nodding toward the senseless Jehu.

"Another of the same ilk," Major Menace gritted.

"But sit down, boys, and steady your nerves with a swig of rye. We've a hefty job ahead of us."

"Or flight," muttered Pepper. "Dern mel ef thet haydoogin ov young wildcats ye jest mentioned aire on ther same lay, we may as well toss up ther sponge an' leave Bishop Hearne ter fill his harem as best he kin. We can't cope with 'em all!"

"We can, and we will!" asseverated the gambler, fiercely. "The three leading spirits of the crusade against us are in our power. By day-break I'll have a force of trusty fellows on the alert for the Invincibles."

"Twice within a month the stage from Rocky Bar has been held up, and I reckon the Invincibles will come to the conclusion that this is a decidedly unhealthy locality before the Vigilantes of Yellow Dust are through with them."

"I tell you, pards, the stake is worth a desperate struggle. Hearne's \$10,000 isn't a mite in the pile!"

"The Silver Streak is worth a king's ransom ten times over, and I know it! The last ton yesterday yielded one hundred and fifty ounces!"

"Impossible!" gasped Gideon Grim.

"No; it is solid fact. It is bound to become the best-paying mine in this district. It has never yielded less than forty ounces; and, were Orndare not so heavily handicapped, the \$15,000 ransom money wouldn't be a flea-bite."

"Now, what say you?"

"I'll stick ter ther last," announced Marshal Pepper, moistening his lips greedily.

"Here, too," the mayor declared.

"Then sit down, and we'll talk business."

"The first thing is to get rid of Orthodox."

"Leave him here for a couple of hours," muttered Grim, after a moment's silence. "I think I have a plan that will answer, when we have gotten rid of Little Lightning."

"Then, as Old Man Keene is to attend to the boy, we may as well pass on to Bolly Darrit," said the major.

"Ef I may make a suggestion," Pepper put in, half-fearfully, as he thrust his hand into an inner pocket of his coat, "ef ye galoots will listen ter me, I opine thet I kin open up es purty a trap es war ever sprung."

"Thet's what we want," averred Gideon

Grim. "I've no more liking for this job, in its present shape, than have you, Red Pepper; but we've got ourselves into a box, and I'm willing to adopt any measure to get out, so long as we can hide our hands."

"That's me," Menace declared. "Proceed, Pepper."

The marshal slowly drew his hand from his pocket and disclosed the timepiece taken from the captured detective.

"Thar's Buster Mack's ticker," he muttered, huskily, his bloodshot eyes glancing from one to the other of his *confreres*. "Et guv ther hull snap away, an' I reckon et kin be made ter putt Darrit's head through a noose!"

Menace recoiled, with an oath, his dark eyes aflame.

"Mack and Darrit were one!" he ejaculated.

"Jes' so, pard," grimly uttered Pepper. "But we aire ther on'y ones thet knew et. Ef Buster's ticker, wrapped in a bloody 'kerchief, war found on Bill Williams, an' ther fact should become known, w'ot w'd be ther result?"

"Judge Lynch would have a case before morning," Major Grim replied. "Buster Mack was the most popular sport that ever struck the camp, and vengeance would follow swift and sure."

A peculiar smile flitted across the marshal's face.

"Thet's ther game," he declared, briefly.

"Push et, an' we'll win!"

"The plot is feasible," averred the gambler, after a moment of deliberation.

"The night is yet young, and if we crowd things, morning will see us clear."

"I'll go down and order the release of the cab," said Mayor Grim. "Come with me, Pepper, and we'll have Keene follow closely, so that this Little Lightning will have no chance to give him the slip."

"And Orthodox?" queried Major Menace.

"Keep him here until I return," the mayor replied. "We will pay the bishop a visit before midnight and we'll carry the spy with us."

The two officials then took their departure, proceeding straightway to the lock-up.

Old man Keene was not far in their rear.

Arrived at the prison, Pepper rapped sharply at the door, which a moment later was opened, revealing Sandy Jordan.

"This way, Sandy," uttered Mayor Grim, cautiously. "I want to see you in private a moment."

"I'm yer huckleberry," the jailer exclaimed, and he followed Grim into the shadow at the corner of the building.

"W'ot's ther row, boss?"

"Sh! not so loud!" warned the mayor.

"There will be trouble in Yellow Dust before morning—a lynching bee, and I want to put you on your guard!"

"Ther fat galoot?"

"Yes; it has leaked out that he waylaid and killed Buster Mack, and as the sport had made many friends in the camp it is not at all unlikely that something tragical will happen."

"Oho! I see, I see, es ther goose remarked ter ther fox."

"You will do all you can to protect the prisoner, so that the law may take its course," the official continued. "I can't just bring myself to blame Mack's friends, but it is time Yellow Dust put upon the shelf that wild and woolly character, Judge Lynch."

"I allow ye've jumped astraddle ov the right animal," Sandy Jordan observed, nodding sagely. "Yaller Dust kin git along 'thout the good ole jedge, an' ye kin jest slap yer pile on et thet thar'll be no neck-tie party ter-night!"

"Ther jail war built fer service, an' I kalkilate I'm the sportive sport w'ot kin hold et ag'in' all comers, bar none!"

"That's about the size of it," readily assented the mayor; "but I want to caution you on one point, Sandy."

"It is a clean case against this Williams, and if it comes to the scratch and the boys refuse to take a stand-off you are not to lay any of 'em out. The cuss isn't worth it."

The darkness hid the peculiar grin that crossed the jailer's face.

"Mebbe not," he assented.

"But w'ot about ther kid?"

"I've concluded to release him," replied Grim.

"He might fare hard if the boys conclude to get in their work."

In the mean time Bolly Darrit and Little Lightning had stealthily left the couch and taken up a position near the door, determined to hear what passed in the adjoining room, if possible.

As the jailer stepped outside at the request of

Gideon Grim, the marshal entered the building and walked rapidly to the back of the room.

"Some derved skin game," muttered Darrit. "I wish ther long-legged critter hed left ther wicket open. Et'd 'a' bin a consarned sight more satisfactory."

Then the click of a revolver-lock came from the direction in which Pepper had gone, and both listened intently.

A lapse of two minutes, and then the sound was repeated.

"Bring out the cub," ordered the major, throwing himself into a seat.

The prisoners beat a stealthy retreat to the cot.

"Look out fer a cold deck," warned Darrit, in a low tone. "Ef ye git a chainece, git word ter yer pards. Mebbe—"

At that juncture the wicket was opened, and a bolt of light flashed across the cot.

Sandy Jordan's face appeared in the aperture.

"Hyar, young feller!" he exclaimed, gruffly, "come out ov thet. Ther mayor wants ter git his peepers onter ye."

The next minute Little Lightning was in the presence of the pair of scheming officials.

"Young man!" exclaimed Mayor Gideon Grim, as he softly polished his spectacles, "I've concluded that it would be better for all concerned to release you on your own recognition."

"Take up your tools and scoot! If you are not outside of Yellow Dust in fifteen minutes, the end of a halter awaits you!"

For just a breath the piercing black eyes of the young ranger met the mild blue orbs of Gideon Grim in a steady glance, then shifted to the face of Pepper.

The two plotters shivered.

Then, his revolvers and knife again in his belt, his Winchester at his back, Little Lightning strode out into the streets of the camp.

CHAPTER V.

THE HERMIT-MINER AND HIS DAUGHTER.

"RACHEL, my child, I must leave you to yourself to-day—perhaps until far into the night."

"Whither now, papa?"

"To Pioche, to wind up my affairs there."

"Papa! you have attained your object!"

There was a glad ring in the pleasant young voice—a sparkle of delight in the lustrous blue eyes of Rachel Carson.

"I have, my dear," was the grave response. "That is, I have amassed wealth enough to keep the wolf from our door forevermore. As for the other matter—"

Lewis Carson hesitated; then his teeth came together with a sharp, resolute click.

"The old aversion remains, but I shall live it down," he steadily cautioned, after a moment.

"You are out of place in these hills. My jewel must have a proper setting."

"Papa!"

"Well, Rachel?"

"Why not remain here? Are we not happy and contented?"

Carson smiled sadly, yet tenderly.

"We have been, dear—more so than I could have hoped," he replied. "But it is all at an end now. I have been tracked within a mile of here, time and again. Let it once be discovered that Mase, the Hermit-Miner, and Lewis Carson are identical, and all peace, all security, will vanish."

"No, it is my duty, it is the part of wisdom, to go. I told you of my suspicions some days ago; they have been verified, and this shall be my last trip to Pioche."

"I will go now and secure the horses."

That brief sentence ended the conversation. Buckling on his revolvers and knife, Carson left the cabin.

Rachel gazed after him wistfully, her blue eyes dewy with unshed tears.

"Poor papa! there is a cloud upon your life!" she murmured, sighing as she turned to her work.

Beauteous was this girl of sixteen, and stamped on every feature was the promise of a glorious womanhood.

No child of the mountains was she, rude and uncouth; refined, graceful, a graduate of one of the best schools of the country, and pure in mind and heart, she was all that heart of father could wish.

The neat interior of the cabin bore on every hand traces of her presence; the dooryard was a mass of bloom, and the windows were embowered in vine and blossom.

Lewis Carson was not long absent.

On re-entering the cabin, he carefully inspect-

ed his weapons, then selected a repeating-rifle from a number in a rack against the wall.

Tall and spare, yet agile and muscular, dressed in the rude garb of a hunter and booted and spurred, he certainly presented a redoubtable appearance.

And that appearance did not belie the man.

A moment sufficed to complete his preparations, and he then caught Rachel to his breast.

"Good-by, my sweet one!" he murmured, tenderly kissing the upturned face. "Be wary and cautious. It is the last time you are to be left alone in this solitude. If you grow weary, go to the Retreat and await me there."

"Have no fears for me, papa," was the brave response.

Yet another exchange of caresses, and then Carson left the cabin and hurried toward the artfully-hidden stables.

From the doorway Rachel watched his receding form. At the edge of a dense thicket he turned and looked back at the slender, dark-robed figure, thrown into relief by the first rays of the sun. The tiny white hand waved a farewell, and, sighing, Lewis Carson plunged into the undergrowth.

A narrow path wound through its depths, leading beneath an overhanging bluff, where were tethered two horses, fine, sleek-looking animals, one bridled and saddled, the other fitted with a well-filled pack-saddle. The hoofs of both were muffled.

Mounting, Carson pushed forward on the narrow, gloomy trail skirting the foot of the bluff for the greater part of a mile, then turned into the thicket, and thence into a rocky, tortuous ravine leading down into a dismal defile.

Here he halted. After a careful scrutiny of his surroundings, he sprung from the saddle and removed the mufflings from the hoofs of the animals.

"Steady, boys, steady!" he muttered, patting the sleek, well-kept grays to quiet their restlessness. "Better save your fire for the work before you."

Then, with another look up and down the defile, Carson gathered up the mufflings and glided through a mass of foliage into a small cave at the foot of an adjacent bluff.

Time hung heavily on the hands of Rachel Carson after the departure of her father. Never before, when left alone at the cabin, had a day passed so drearily.

Her books, the potent charm of which had abridged many a lonely vigil, seemed suddenly to have lost their power and were laid aside. Uneasy, starting at the slightest sound, the hermit's daughter finally sprung from her easy-chair, exclaiming:

"I'll walk it off! A long tramp will rid me of disagreeable fancies and restore tranquillity."

And drawing on a pair of stout walking-boots and donning a broad-brimmed chip hat, Rachel took up her rifle—a light repeater—and closed and locked the cabin.

Taking her way through the neatly-kept garden at the rear of the house, she sought the path through the thicket, which her father had taken some hours before.

Arrived at the point which the hermit had mounted, Rachel turned into the narrow trail winding around the foot of the bluff, going in the direction opposite to that taken by her father.

Half a mile from the cabin, the thicket opened out into a splendid timber growth.

"Now, which way?" was Rachel's thought, as she came to a halt. "Straight and around the mountain, of course."

The place was strange to the girl. It was her first venture in that direction; but she pushed ahead with a light, springy step, her blue eyes busy with her surroundings.

A mile from the thicket she came upon a gloomy defile, reaching far back into the range.

At the same moment she was startled by a mellow laugh, and the sound of approaching footsteps.

Just time to shrink behind a friendly boulder, had Rachel, and then into view strode two young men, apparently from the defile.

Handsome, stalwart fellows they were, and it required no second glance at their garb or their weapons, to tell that they were prairie rangers.

One was dark, the other fair, and there all difference ended. In form and in feature, in garb and in weapons, they were doubles.

There could be no doubt that they were twin brothers, and their age was evidently between eighteen and twenty-one.

"Kent, we separate here, for the time being," said he of the dark face, coming to a stop with-

in a dozen paces of the boulder behind which Rachel Carson was crouching.

"I leave the mine in your hands until my return."

"Guard it well, for I don't like the looks of the numerous prowlers about of late."

"Nor do I, Davy," was the prompt avowal; "but you may rest assured that it will take tall work to dislodge and rout the Prairie Invincibles, if I do say it."

David Kane—"Little Lightning"—nodded as if perfectly satisfied on that score.

"The claim is ours, clean and clear, and I reckon the boys will hold onto it as long as they can hold a 'six,' or grip a bowie," he remarked.

"But I must get on down to the Yellow Dust trail, for I do not care to miss the stage."

"You may look for me back to-morrow night, barring accident or delay."

"So long, Kent."

"Luck to you, Davy."

With a warm clasp of their hands, the brothers parted, Little Lightning proceeding on his way down the mountain, while Kent Kane remained motionless, gazing after him.

"Brave, true Davy!" he muttered, as he at last retraced his steps into the depths of the defile.

Rachel Carson witnessed his departure with a breath of relief.

"They are noble-looking fellows," the girl could not help thinking; "yet, I am glad that I was not seen."

"It seems that they, too, have a secret claim and are beset by spies."

"But I will return to the cabin, for I might be seen and tracked by the prowling knaves."

The return was without adventure.

The afternoon gave place to evening, and then night came down in starlit beauty.

Contrary to her usual custom, Rachel determined to sit up to await the coming of her father.

Her uneasiness had returned with two-fold force. The words of the open book on her lap were a blur. Between her eyes and the pages seemed to float the dark, handsome face of David Kane.

Midnight came and went, without the return of Lewis Carson.

One—two—three o'clock!

Rachel sat down, in despair.

"Something has happened!" she moaned, wringing her hands. "He is three hours later than ever before!"

A shuffling, dragging sound, a quick, sharp tapping at the door, followed the words, and Rachel sprang to her feet.

"Who is there?" she demanded, her voice quivering between fear and suspicion.

"Open, Rachel—I'm hurt!" was the weak-voiced reply.

Her face growing colorless, her blue eyes dilating with a nameless dread, the girl glided across the room and unlocked and opened the door, to a start back with a piercing shriek.

It was not the honest, rugged face of Lewis Carson that looked in at her from the gloom!

On the threshold, aglow with wicked satisfaction, stood Rico Rube and Peet Brown!

CHAPTER VI.

THE ASSASSIN'S SHOT.

DRAWING into the shadow at the end of the lock-up, Little Lightning closely scanned that portion of the rough street visible.

"There's a gum-game of some sort back of this move on the part of Grim, Menace & Co.," muttered the astute youth. "If I could scent it, I'd block it, or go back into limbo!"

"It's Bolly they're after, though, and I reckon nothing short of the Invincibles can pull him through."

As there was nothing to indicate the presence of a lurking foe or spy, the young ranger proceeded rapidly down the street toward the center of the camp.

Arrived at the St. George Hotel, he hastened to his room, drew the curtains, locked the door and hung his hat over the keyhole, after which he lighted a lamp.

Then out came his revolvers for a critical examination.

Every bullet had been drawn.

"As I suspected!" Little Lightning muttered, with a grim smile. "Sandy Jordan wasn't called aside for nothing."

"It begins to look as if they might be 'going' for me as well as for Bolly; but I calculate they'll be disappointed somewhat when it comes to the scratch."

"It was a mean cur that put up such a job, and if they crowd their game, I shall feel called

upon to do the best I can for this fiery Red Pepper."

Having carefully reloaded his weapons, Little Lightning tightened his belt and otherwise prepared himself for the arduous errand before him.

Then, just as he extinguished the light, there was a cautious rapping at the door.

"Friend or foe?" the youth asked himself. "A moment will tell!"

Relighting the lamp, he unlocked the door and flung it wide open.

In the hallway stood a man—a tall trimly-built personage, of commanding mien, plainly dressed, and, so far as appearances went, unarmed.

The deep lines in his fine face, the silvery whiteness of his closely-cropped hair and mustache, betrayed the ravages of not less than fifty years; but the flash of his keen, piercing black eyes revealed a spirit unbroken and undaunted.

"You are Little Lightning?" he exclaimed, abruptly.

"I am."

"My name is Orndare—Jim Orndare, of the Silver Streak Mine."

"I am here to warn you that your life is menaced by the cut-throat gang infesting this camp."

Little Lightning bowed.

"Come inside, Mr. Orndare," he said, extending his hand. "You are the very man I wanted to see."

"I can readily believe that," as warmly returned the mine-owner, "as I have every reason to suspect that you are in the confidence of Bill Williams."

"To a degree, I am," admitted Little Lightning, closing the door and placing the single chair in the apartment at the disposal of his visitor.

"And now, Mr. Orndare," he continued, "we must be as brief as possible. My friend is in imminent danger of death at the hands of the cohort besetting you; and, unless decisive measures are promptly adopted, he is lost."

A peculiar smile crossed the mine-owner's face.

"They'll have to fight to get him," he declared, a fiery glint appearing in his black eyes. "I've gotten together half a dozen of the more trustworthy of my men, and Bolly Darrit shall have at least a fighting chance."

"At the first sign of an attempt at lynch-law, it will be found that the Saints haven't things altogether their own way in Yellow Dust."

"Thanks to Darrit, my eyes are opening as to the identity of my foes, and they shall find that fire can be met with fire."

Little Lightning openly expressed his satisfaction.

"As Bolly has probably informed you, my daughter has been abducted and is held for ransom by this accursed Mormon cohort," pursued Orndare, with knitted brows; "and it would be extremely impolitic therefore for me to take the field openly in this matter."

"You must meet cunning with cunning, strategy with strategy," Little Lightning acquiesced.

"That is the idea, exactly. I must fight from under cover. If a mob, at the instigation of these devilish plotters, go to the jail to-night to hang Darrit and be resisted by a body of picked men of the camp, my connection with that body should by all means remain unknown. Otherwise my daughter would be imperiled."

"And yet, should that thing happen, it would be laid at your door," observed the young ranger. "They are striking at Darrit as your agent—a detective in your employ."

"Very true, as to their motive," returned Orndare, pulling from his pocket a wig and a false beard. "As to my part in the affair, however, all would be mere conjecture, inasmuch as it is supposed that I am in Bullionville."

The mine-owner carefully adjusted his disguise, then continued:

"Even Darrit himself believes that I am away from Yellow Dust; yet, I was present at the Monumental when he made his appearance there."

"Your disguise is certainly a capital one," avowed Little Lightning, after a critical scrutiny of the make-up. "You will be safe in taking the field yourself."

"I propose to do so. There are eight of us, all told, and, although the odds will be overwhelmingly against us, yet I think we shall be able to make a pretty good fight."

"I've nine trusty pards back in the hills a few miles, and you may count on them," said the ranger.

Needless to say, this proffer of assistance was gladly accepted.

"And that brings me to my real errand here," said Orndare, when he had expressed his thanks.

"As I have before stated, my daughter, Millie, has been abducted by this villainous cohort, with a view of extorting a ransom. Unfortunately for the success of their plans, they have placed the amount not less than \$5,000 higher than I can go, and I have been compelled to invoke the aid of detectives, of whom Darrit is the chief."

"Through him I have heard of you and the Prairie Invincibles, and, taking advantage of your unexpected appearance in Yellow Dust, I am here to make you a proposition."

"My daughter has been secreted somewhere in the surrounding hills. Find her, return her to me, and I will pay you \$5,000 in hard cash."

"I won't accept your proposition, Mr. Orndare," Little Lightning exclaimed, after a moment of deliberation. "It is out of the question."

"But you may consider the Invincibles wholly at your service, you to meet only the expenses of the search; and I assure you that my pards will scour the hills with a zest, for the fact that a lady is in distress will arouse their strongest sympathy and call forth their stoutest efforts."

"Then, too, they abhor and detest the Mormon hierarchy, and nothing could suit them better than a whack at that monstrous evil."

"You may certainly count upon us, Mr. Orndare, with the understanding that the Invincibles subordinate themselves to Bolly Darrit."

"So be it, my boy," cried the mine-owner, taking the young ranger by the hand, while his black eyes flashed hopefully. "But remember, if you succeed the money is yours—you may demand any reward within the bounds of reason and it is yours."

"And now, a word as to yourself: You have not been released simply as a matter of justice. There is a dark motive back of the move, and if you are wise you will be exceedingly wary."

"I am painfully aware of the fact," smilingly returned Little Lightning.

"In fact," pursued Orndare, "I am positive that you are a marked man. Old Man Keene accompanied Grim and Pepper to the jail, and shadowed you thence to the hotel."

"The actions of the trio aroused my suspicions, and I followed them, taking the opposite side of the street, and so witnessed a part of their maneuvers."

"Sandy Johnson wasn't called out of the jail without an object. Pepper wished to be alone inside."

"Have you examined your weapons?"

"Yes—the bullets were drawn."

"That explains it all, and at the same time forms another link in the chain of evidence going to show that Grim, Pepper, Menace, Keene, Rico Rube and Peet Brown are ruling spirits of the desperate cabal."

"Give 'em plenty of rope," quoted Little Lightning, nodding shortly.

"And now, Orndare, I must go. It will be daylight before I can bring my boys up. If you can stand the critters off till then, well and good. If not—"

A lurid flash of the ranger's black eyes completed the sentence. The death of Bolly Darrit would not pass unavenged.

Little Lightning left the hotel a quarter of an hour in advance of Orndare.

Straight down the rough street went the young ranger, striking into the Rocky Bar trail at the outskirts of the camp.

A glance over his shoulder detected no sign of pursuit.

"If they make an attack, it will be from ambush," he muttered.

The surmise was correct.

A mile from the camp, in one of the gloomiest stretches of the trail, a sudden flash lighted up the bushes, and, with the sharp report of the assassin's weapon, Little Lightning uttered a cry of agony and fell at full length.

CHAPTER VII.

LITTLE LIGHTNING'S ADVENTURE.

No ordinary western desperado was Old Man Keene.

His career had been as checkered as criminal. Born in the Mexican Province of Sonora, of outlawed American parents in hiding among the wild fastnesses along the upper waters of the Rio Altar, that region had been made the scene of his first depredations.

At the time he made his appearance in Yellow

Dust, his age could not have been short of five-and-fifty years.

The six years immediately following his departure from the Province of Sonora had been spent among the most desperate of the criminal class of the Old World. He had been a thug in Paris, a brigand in Italy. Returning to America at the age of twenty-five, with the spoils of his outlawry, he passed as a gentleman of means, traveled extensively, and finally settled down to the quiet life of a planter, purchasing a large plantation not far from the then thriving little Kentucky town of Maysville.

But the role of gentleman farmer did not sit well with him; the evil in his nature cropped out, and at the end of five years he was again an avowed outlaw, and a penniless fugitive.

Then from the depths of penury he again rose at a bound, to become one of the most merciless of the card-sharps common to the Mississippi at that time. Handsome, of polished exterior, it was years before an unsavory notoriety compelled him to abandon that field.

Back to his old haunt in Sonora he went, when finally forced to abandon the river, and thence into Arizona, where he gathered about him as desperate a band of road-agents as had ever cursed the Territory, making his headquarters in the wildest region of the Gadsden Purchase.

A few years later found him in Utah, a dignitary high in the Mormon hierarchy—crafty, unscrupulous as ever, prominent as a politician among the Latter Day Saints, and in thorough unison with their wicked plotting toward the attainment of political power.

So much as to the real character of this hired assassin. His mission in Yellow Dust, under an assumed personality, will be developed in due time.

When Little Lightning left the shadow of the jail, he was followed at a safe distance by Keene, until lost to sight in the St. George Hotel.

For a moment the desperado was startled by this move on the part of the young ranger.

"Can it be that he intends staying right here and standing by his pard?" he asked himself, shrinking back into the shadows on the opposite side of the street. Such a move would materially alter our plans!

"I'll remain right here until the gentleman reappears, and thus solve the riddle."

And the desperado was as good as his word. Patiently he awaited the reappearance of Little Lightning, then again set forward on his trail, keeping the youth just within range of his keen, ferrety black eyes.

"That settles you, my fine fellow!" the cunning outlaw muttered, turning aside from the trail and seeking a narrow footpath. "This short-cut will enable me to intercept you, and put an artistic finish to my job!"

Once under cover of the undergrowth, Keene struck out at a sharp, loping pace, which not only carried him over the ground with great rapidity, but at the same time demonstrated a thorough knowledge of the hidden path.

At a distance of little more than a half-mile, the desperado again entered the Rocky Bar trail.

"So much for that fortunate loop in the road!" he muttered, breathing hard from his recent exertions. "Now, to dig a pit for the unwary gamecock!"

Listening intently to assure himself that Little Lightning was not yet approaching, the desperado cast about him for a suitable covert.

Within ten paces, growing close up to the trail, was a clump of bushes which seemed to offer the shelter desired, and without loss of time he crouched behind it, drawing and examining his revolver.

"Now let him come," Keene muttered, between his clinched teeth, as the faint clicking of the cylinder ceased. "One shot, and I am rid of one of the most powerful allies Orndare could have!"

Scarcely had the last words been uttered when a slight sound a short distance up the trail warned the desperado that his victim was approaching, and a moment later Little Lightning was fairly in the trap.

Breathing hard, yet cool and collected, as merciless as a tiger, Old Man Keene deliberately raised his weapon to a level and fired.

So sure was the assassin of his aim—of the defenseless condition of Little Lightning—that he never paused to note the effect of his shot, but sprang to his feet and out into the trail.

Little Lightning, with a wild cry, had fallen upon his back, not a half-dozen paces from the ambush. In less than the time it takes to tell it, Keene was bending over him.

"He's done for," coolly uttered the assassin, peering with strangely glowing eyes into the white, upturned face of the youth. "Now, to get rid of the body."

And putting away his revolver, after a cautious glance up and down the trail, Keene put forth his hand to seize the ranger's shoulders.

Then it was that a terrified yell burst from the desperado's lips.

A pair of strong hands had grasped his wrists, and the next instant he was flung violently upon his back.

"Lie there, you dog!" enunciated Little Lightning, in menacing strains. "You're caught in a trap of your own making!"

"You calculated to 'go' for me in villainous style, and had I not been up to your dodge you would have succeeded, too!"

"Dastard! Devil! Who set up this job? Speak, or I'll choke the life out of you!"

The young ranger's voice was hoarse with anger. Deftly stripping away Keene's weapons, he clutched him by the throat.

"Speak—out with it!" he exclaimed, his black eyes lighting up with a terrible glow. "It is your only chance, and a slim one at that!"

"Hands off my throat, then!" sputtered the baffled assassin. "Ef et's my life, or peach, ye kin gamble on't I'll live, every time!"

"Thar! My humble thanks, boss! Ef them thar fingers ov yours didn't fit so snug es a halter—"

"Whose game was it?" coldly interrupted Little Lightning, placing the muzzle of a six-shooter against Keene's temple. "Cut it short, too, for I don't intend to stop long with you. Understand?"

"Es ef I c'u'dn't, boss! You bet! I hop right onto yer meanin', an'—I'll tell ye ther straight truth, with never a frill!"

"Ye 'members Ole Man Keene, I reckon? Wal, I'm thet ornery pilgrim—bet yer life! Es fer ther game, et's mine, from A ter Izzard!"

"Don't lie!"

"Et's gospel, boss! Ef 'tain't, may my eyes see stars through ther back ov my head!" protested the ruffian, with a sort of lugubrious solemnity.

"I war after yer roll, an' as one plan w'u'dn't work, I hed to tackle another. That's ther long an' short ov et, an' ef ye roosted on me till mornin'—"

"Get up!" tersely interrupted Little Lightning, in disgust, as he sprang to his feet. "And don't you attempt any of your tricks. I've put fresh bullets in my guns, and I'll warrant them to go straight!"

"I'm going to turn you loose, but I'll keep your weapons. Go! and remember that if our trails cross again I shall exact full satisfaction for this night's work!"

"Thankee, boss! Ef—"

"Off with you, at a double-quick!"

Old Man Keene obeyed, laying his course toward Yellow Dust. The ranger's voice was in itself a warning.

Little Lightning waited only until the desperado had disappeared, then turned and with long strides hastened down the trail.

"It was Old Man Keene, sure enough," he mused. "The grim old scoundrel! He must have followed me to the outskirts of the camp, and then, by means of a by-path, forged ahead."

"At any rate, he played his game fairly well, naught but his enforced haste marring it. Had not his hard breathing warned me just in the nick of time, his bullet would have gone straight home."

"But, that he, and he alone, was the prime mover in the assault, is altogether too flimsy to be readily believed. He is no more nor less than a tool for the Mormon cohort infesting Yellow Dust."

And thus, pondering the varied events of the night, Little Lightning hastened along until fully five miles from the silver-camp. Then he abruptly left the trail, entering the wooded hills to the right.

"It will save two miles of the distance, and time is precious," he muttered.

For upwards of half an hour he pushed steadily onward, almost due southwest. The way was rough and toilsome—utterly impossible in the dense gloom to one not an adept in woodcraft.

Pushing through a heavy growth of young timber, the ranger at length reached the foot of a wide bluff, at the base of which there seemed to be a beaten path.

A moment's examination proved that such was indeed the case, and, with no small degree of satisfaction, yet with every sense alert, Little Lightning hurried along the narrow trail.

"It may lead to the rendezvous of some outlaw gang, or simply the quarters of a hermit-miner,"

he thought. "At any rate, it leads toward my pards, and so I shall follow it for a time, at least."

An exceedingly short time it proved.

Within five minutes the young ranger was startled by the shrill whinnying of a horse a short distance ahead.

"That calls for an abandonment of this route," he muttered, with a species of grim humor. "A detour is preferable to an argument as to right of way."

Re-entering the thicket, he glided along with the stealth of a red-skin. Two, three hundred yards were passed, and then he came upon a small open space, near the center of which loomed up the outlines of a substantial cabin.

At the same moment, a door was flung open, shooting a broad belt of light across the clearing and revealing two men upon the threshold.

But the object upon which the eyes of Little Lightning at once became fixed was the petite, dark-robed figure in the doorway—the figure of a young and beautiful girl.

Just an instant of absolute silence—then a piercing scream rung out, and uttering hoarse cries of anger, the two men pushed boldly into the cabin!

Through the veins of Little Lightning the blood surged holly. His hands clinched, his face flushed, then paled, and into his eyes leaped a light of direst ire. Toward the cabin he hurried, with swift, noiseless strides, to become a factor in the stirring scene!

CHAPTER VIII.

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

RACHEL CARSON was undoubtedly a girl of courage, yet the evil, gloating faces of Rico Rube and Peet Brown appearing at such a time and under such conditions, almost stilled the beating of her staunch heart and forced from her lips a frightened cry.

What did this unseasonable visit of the two roughs portend?

Had they waylaid Lewis Carson, her father?

The ruse adopted to gain admittance to the cabin showed that they were certainly aware of his absence.

With these thoughts flitting swiftly through her brain, Rachel staggered back a pace, clutching at the door as if to close it.

"Drop thet," growled Rico Rube, scowling darkly. "Ef ye try eny sich game es thet, ye'll wish ye hedn't."

Even as he spoke, the desperado crowded across the threshold, closely followed by Brown, who promptly closed and fastened the door.

Faint with terror to the verge of swooning, Rachel dropped limply into a chair, burying her face in her hands.

"Come, now, my lady, thet won't do nuther!" pursued Rube, gruffly, his rough hand settling on her shoulder. "No weepin', no hysteericks, please! We're hyar on bizness, we aire!"

"Whar's ther old man?"

Her eyes flushing with indignation, Rachel rose, flinging aside her tormentor's hand, and Rube realized that he had adopted the wrong tactics.

"Cain't ye answer?" he growled, after a moment's silence.

"If you mean my father, I do not know," the girl replied, steadily meeting his dark gaze. "But you may be quite sure that you will be made to suffer for this intrusion."

"If you have any business here, state it, and begone."

The two desperadoes exchanged a look, then joined in an outburst of coarse laughter.

"Ye need hev no alarm, gal," averred Rube, throwing aside his hat and coolly settling into the depths of an easy-chair. "We don't intend ter do ye a mite ov harm. No, no!—thet ain't our game a'tall! Hey, Peet?"

"Nary time," promptly corroborated that ruffian, following his leader's example and bestowing himself in a comfortable chair. "We w'u'dn't harm a hair ov yer purty head, gal, fer ther biggest streak ov silver in these hyar hills!"

"We look like toughs, but we're puffec' gentlemen, jest ther same; an' I reckon ef yer pap was hyar, he'd mighty soon tell ye we war reg'lar ole pards ov his'n!"

"Thet's w'ot!" Rube cried, chuckling at his pard's conceit. "We're three ole pards, we aire, an' I bet ef Lew war hyar he'd treat us right royally, too!"

"An' thet minds me, my lady, thet I'm nigh starved. S'pose ye rustle 'round an' set out a lurch—no matter what, so long es thar's plenty ov et."

Rachel simply nodded.

Terror had given way to indignation, and

that to a cool determination to thwart the ruffians, if possible.

She hailed the demand for food with a breath of secret relief, the hope that her father had escaped an encounter with the two desperadoes outweighing the dark suspicion that he had met with foul play. Had he so escaped, he might now be expected to appear at any moment, and with his appearance the affair would assume a vastly different phase.

Lewis Carson, with his matchless cunning and skill and strength, would rescue her and punish the villainous intruders.

Peet Brown must have divined something of these thoughts, for as the girl silently turned to comply with the pointed request, he stepped before her, his cruel eyes ablaze with suspicion.

"Let me tell ye, Rachel Carson, thet ye don't want to try any ov ther flimsy on us," he warned, a half-smile adding to the vindictiveness of his expression. "Don't try ter guv us ther slip, nor don't ye fool away any time, or ye'll be sorry for it—mind thet!"

"Stuff!" growled Rube, in a sudden and unaccountable blaze of resentment. "Let ther gal alone, Peet!"

Brown slunk aside, taking a position where the movements of the girl could be narrowly watched.

Her hand tightly clasping the handle of a small revolver hidden away in the folds of her dress, Rachel passed into the second room of the cabin, where a moment later she set about her task.

In due course, the table was laid, and then with a gesture she indicated that the meal was in readiness.

The two ruffians fell to with avidity.

In the midst of the repast came a cautious rapping at the door.

"Ther deuce!" ejaculated Rube, abruptly gaining his feet. "We've tarried too long! Thet must be ther ole man hisself!"

Peet followed his example, and they listened, weapons in hand.

A flush of hope appeared in Rachel's white face. Involuntarily, she moved toward the door, trembling with eagerness.

"Stop!" ordered Rube, in a subdued voice. "Ter open that door will cost yer father his life!"

"Not if you give us a fair count!"

Scarcely louder than a whisper, yet clear, cold and distinct, the words stung through the room, coming from a point directly behind the two ruffians and causing them to wheel in direct confusion and alarm.

Rachel uttered a faint cry.

Crouching in the wide fireplace, a leveled revolver in each hand, was a third intruder—a tall, handsome youth, beyond doubt a prairie nomad!

"Et's thet cussed Little Lightning!" grated Rico Rube, his hands working nervously.

"Yes, I am Little Lightning," quietly averred the young ranger, leaving his cramped quarters.

"Up with your hands, both of you!"

"Miss, you may open that door."

Utterly crestfallen at this unexpected collapse of their plans, the two ruffians obeyed, and Rachel Carson hastened to admit her father.

The opening of the door revealed a man of venerable appearance on the threshold, and Rico Rube's face betrayed fresh surprise and alarm.

"Pard, et's Mose, the Hermit-Miner, and this is a bad job for us!" he ejaculated, the words coming from his lips mechanically.

Rachel uttered a cry of joy.

"Villain! you were never nearer the exact truth!" said Lewis Carson, sternly, as he stepped quickly into the room.

"Rachel, what does it all mean? Have they—"

A deep chuckle interrupted the miner, causing him to face about sharply, a revolver in each hand. Alert though he was, yet the movement was too late.

In the doorway beyond him were a group of rough-looking fellows—men of sinister mien and heavily armed.

One glance sufficed to put Carson in full possession of the grim facts of the case.

A crisis was at hand.

"Tracked!" he exclaimed, whitening to the lips.

"Exactly, boss," vouchsafed the leader of the squad, with an evil smile. "The race of Mose, the Hunter-Miner is run!"

"Keep your hands down; we will relieve you of your weapons. If you resist it will be your death!"

While speaking, the desperado had advanced, and Lewis Carson was speedily disarmed and forced aside.

Rico Rube and Peet Brown, after the first

start of surprise, witnessed the proceeding with the utmost composure.

Scarcely a second glance had been needed to establish the fact that the new-comers were of their ilk.

Rachel, too, realized as much, and stood as if bereft of hope.

And Little Lightning?

At the very instant Lewis Carson was unceremoniously thrust aside, there was a swift patter of feet across the cabin floor, a short, sharp scream, and with Rachel Carson in his arms the young miner disappeared in the second room.

"Lively, lads!" roared Rico Rube, springing forward; "lively! or ye'll lose him, ther devil!"

A spirited general rush followed the words, Rube leading the way; but the solid door clanged, a heavy bar rattled into place, and, for a brief time at least, Little Lightning and his protegee were safe.

"Baffled!" grated the chief of the roughs.

"Yes, baffled, Jason Marks," came the voice of Little Lightning, from the inner room.

"But for a time only," supplemented one of the crowd, a gaunt, ill-shapen fellow, evidently second in command.

"I would suggest, Cap, that the house be surrounded. We can then knock that door into splinters, with a stout bit of timber, at our leisure."

"That is undoubtedly the proper plan, Con," the chief admitted, and he proceeded to tell off and station the men.

Rico Rube and Peet Brown drew aside.

"Et looks bad fer us," muttered Rube, his wolfish eyes roving restlessly over his surroundings. "Ef Marks an' his crew want ther gal, too, we aire left!"

"Exactly!" Peet acquiesced. "Thet is, ef we let him hev et thet way!"

"W'ot kin we do?"

"Do? A heap!"

Rube shook his head dubiously.

"I cain't see it. Ef I c'u'd—"

"Ye kin!" interrupted Peet, earnestly. "Jest wait an' let me engineer et. Fall in with Marks an' his gang; do es they do—till ye hear from me!"

At this juncture, Marks hailed the scheming pair, saying:

"Hyar, pards—you, ef ye're with us—lay a holt, an' give us a lift. That door must come down."

The two complied with alacrity.

Then back and forth, upheld by four pairs of stout arms, swayed the heavy timber, to fall with a resounding crash against the door, forcing it ajar.

A shout of triumph escaped Jason Marks.

"Slow and easy, pards," he cautioned the next moment, as his followers surged forward. "Ther critter's no slouch!"

"An' he's got his pepper-boxes," added Con, grimly.

"But we must get them out of there, and quickly, too," pursued the chief.

"Putt out ther light, an' make a rush fer et!" one of the men suggested.

This course was quickly decided upon.

Its execution was the matter of but a moment.

To the surprise of all, however, no resistance was offered.

Once in the room, Marks struck a match. Its fitful glow disclosed a startling fact.

Little Lightning and Rachel Carson were missing.

No clew to the avenue of flight presented itself.

The one window with which the room was provided was covered with a substantial shutter, held in place by a pair of solid bars, and it was evident that the fugitives had not escaped by means of it.

The only door leading from the apartment was the one between the two rooms.

"Furies!" ejaculated Marks, as he quickly noted these facts, and scanned the apparently solid log walls. "Here's a mystery! Bring ther lamp, sum ov ye!"

Pursuant to this request, Con, the lieutenant, stepped into the outer room, striking a match as he passed through the doorway.

No sooner, however, had he applied the spluttering lucifer to the wick, than a yell of genuine dismay burst from his lips.

"Look!" he cried, wildly, pointing to the corner where the captive had been thrown. "Look! The Hermit-Miner has escaped!"

And that half-frantic declaration was the truth, incredible as it seemed; for on the spot where Lewis Carson had been but a moment before, there was nothing but a bunch of severed pinions!

CHAPTER IX.

SANDY JORDAN'S RETREAT.

"WA-AL, ef ther camp hain't well rid ov thet young varlet, I'm no jedge ov such matters!" exclaimed Marshal Red Pepper, as the footsteps of Little Lightning died away, after his liberation from the lock-up of Yellow Dust. "Dern me! I wouldn't won'er, may'r, ef we'd made a leetle mistake in not lettin' ther sassy galoot take ther chances fer life right hyer with Bill Williams!"

"Possible," admitted Grim, with a show of reluctance. "There was certainly a vicious look in the fellow's eyes."

Sandy Jordan, the jailer, gave his head a negative toss.

"Twan't thet," he averred, with the air of a sage. "Ther kid's all right—chock full ov pluck an' bottom, an' not ter be crowded."

"Howsumever, I'm glad enuff he's out ov ther way, ef thar's goin' ter be a ruction. I reckon Williams will be enuff an' a plenty fer Jedge Lynch—barrin' accidents."

"Yes, yes," exclaimed Grim, just a trifle irately. "One victim ought to satisfy the boys."

"But I would suggest, marshal, that we move on down into the camp. Sandy here has been duly introduced, and if anything is brewing we can be of more service there than here."

"Ye kin sartainly do no good hyer," grimly affirmed Jordan, a peculiar look coming over his rugged face. "The prisoner's safe with me—till I hev ter guv him up. When thet pint comes, reckon I'll see w'ot's best ter do."

"No doubt ov et, a' tall," said Pepper, gaining his feet. "Come, Grim—let's vamose."

"Remember 'my instructions,'" warned the mayor, as he turned to leave the prison. "No bloodshed to save the cuss!"

By way of reply, Jordan simply shook his head, the peculiar look upon his face deepening to a grin as the two officials took their departure.

No sooner were they beyond sight and hearing, however, than his visage cleared as if by magic, giving place to a determined expression boding ill to the plans of the plotters.

Closing and carefully securing the door, he crossed the room to the rude table at which Pepper had been seated a moment before, then took up the lamp and closely scanned the floor.

Under the table, well back toward the wall, lay a single cartridge.

"Thort es much!" muttered Jordan, half in triumph. "I heard it drop. Le's see—Pepper's guns aire 44s; this ca'tridge is a 32—ther kid's size!"

"Ther find tells its own story! Bill Williams ain't in hafe ther danger his young pard be!"

Replacing the light on the table, the jailer crossed to the door of the second room, or cell, and deliberately removed its numerous fastenings.

Bolly Darrit stepped forth, his hand extended, a trace of a grin on his round face.

"Shake, pardner!" he exclaimed. "Et took time ter pick a hole in thet thar make-up ov yours, but I've done et!"

"Bolly—"

"Rackhoss! ye condemned Arkansaw scarecrow! Ef I hain't tempted—"

The sentence ended in a hollow gurgle, as the long arms of the jailer suddenly closed around the detective with a bear-like hug.

"Thet'll do, Dan," puffed Bolly, after a moment. "Jest a chainece ter git my breath, an' I'm ready fer eny kind ov a mill!"

"But now, fu'st ov all, tell me w'at this gay deception means."

"Business, every time," Rackhoss replied; "I'll give ye partic'lars later on. Jest now thar's su'thin' more important ter talk about."

"Gid Grim an' Pepper hev set up a bad job on th r kid," and in rapid tones the jailer proceeded to detail his suspicions.

The veteran detective listened to the revelation pointing to a fiendish plot, the varying expression of his eyes betraying no small degree of interest.

"The scoundrels!" he ejaculated, when Rackhoss had ended. "Give me some weapons, Dan. I'll go bail there'll be fun, by and by, if—"

At that juncture a determined rap at the outer door interrupted the conversation.

"Hist!" cautioned Rackhoss, placing his finger upon his lips. "Follow me!"

With that, he moved softly across the floor, halting beside his cot and lifting a trap-door.

"Down!" he cautioned, pointing into the gloomy opening. "Judge Lynch is at hand. The only avenue of escape is by way of my retreat."

Without a word, expostulatory or otherwise, Bolly Darrit descended the ladder with which the hole was provided, to be quickly followed by his singular friend.

In the mean time, the rapping at the door had grown more violent, with loud and frequent demands for Jordan to open the jail and deliver the prisoner.

"Now, let 'em howl!" exclaimed Sandy, as he suddenly dropped from the ladder. "It will require time to open that trap, even if they suspect our whereabouts."

"But if they do, we are like so many rats in a trap," ventured Bolly.

"Hardly," Rackhoss returned, igniting a match. "This way, pardner, and we'll fool these Mormon cusses."

As he spoke, he opened a cunningly contrived door in the side of the excavation, revealing a tunnel-like passage.

"In with you," he urged, fairly pushing Bolly into the opening. "Straight ahead about ten paces, then turn to the left. Wait for me there."

The detective followed the hurriedly-uttered instructions. A moment later he was rejoined by the jailer, lantern in hand.

"This is my 'Retreat,'" explained the latter, holding the lantern aloft, the better to reveal the extent of the underground chamber. "I happened onto it by accident and have kept the discovery to myself."

"There is a hidden passage leading from the wall yonder and opening in a bit of chaparral a few yards back of the jail, and we will escape through it."

"Here, too, are weapons and ammunition in abundance. Arm yourself, and let us go."

A moment sufficed for Bolly Darrit to put himself in "fighting trim," as he expressed it, and then the veteran Dan Rackhoss led the way into the passage, and thence into the chaparral.

The two men listened attentively.

A confused murmur came from the group of Mormon roughs at the front of the cabin. Otherwise all was quiet.

"Plottin' deviltry, dern 'em!" muttered Bolly, relapsing into the vernacular as abruptly as he had abandoned it a few minutes before. "Pard, let's leave 'em ter storm ther castle while we look up ther young 'un."

Rackhoss murmured an assent, and the two cautiously pushed deeper into the chaparral, eventually describing a *detour* and approaching the camp from another direction.

"We may es well git right along ter ther St. George Hotel," declared Bolly, as they halted for a moment in the shadow of a building on the outskirts of the camp. "Like es not we'll find Little Lightning thar, too, so thet we kin settle things in a jiffy."

"I'm agreed," Rackhoss returned. "We can't move too fast, either, fer ef we don't ketch ther kid et ther hotel et's mighty leetle we kin do fer him."

"True," assented Bolly; "but— Hear that!"

A series of heavy crashes, an outburst of triumphant yells, told the story. The door of the jail had been forced.

"Quick, now!" urged Rackhoss. "In ten minutes thet crowd will be scattered throughout ther length an' breadth ov Yellow Dust, an'—ye know w'ot thet means!"

"Ye bet!" Bolly declared, laughing shortly.

"Rope fer two, ef we failed ter stand 'em off."

At a rapid pace the two approached the hotel, Rackhoss leading the way.

A glance sufficed to show that the bar-room was deserted, save by the bartender, and the two detectives boldly entered.

At the same moment, Jim Orndare, the owner of the Silver Streak Mine, disguised as he had appeared before Little Lightning, strode in from the hallway.

At sight of the jailer and his companion, the mine-owner paused in surprise, then, with a significant gesture, turned and walked out into the street.

"Et's ther boss ov ther Silver Streak," uttered Darrit, in wary tones. "We must foller him."

"A leetle rye, barkeep," cried Rackhoss, approaching the bar to allay suspicion. "Darn my ole shoe-packs! ef I don't feel es shaky as Arkansas ager!"

"Bin jest a leetle onpleasant up your way, Sandy, I reckon," returned the tender, setting out a bottle and glasses. "Et's gone over Yaller Dust like a flash thet Buster Mack's bin murdered, an' thet his slayer war quartered at ther Hotel Jordan fer ther night."

"Pore ole Buster! He war a plum good 'un, he war."

"Jes' so," assented Rackhoss, lifting his glass.

"When I see ther boyees comin' I jest slid out."

Et wa'n't my funeral, ye know, ef they hanged ther bloody cuss."

"Nary time!"

"Hyar's lookin' at ye, barkeep'."

The glasses clicked, and a suggestive gurgle followed. Then Dan Rackhoss drew his sleeve across his lips and turned to Bolly, saying:

"Le's slip up an' see how they've done et, pardner. I'm a leetle cur'us ter see w'ot kind ov a knot they tied."

Darrit nodded assent, and they hastened from the bar-room.

In the shadow at the corner of the hotel they were met by Orndare, who at once drew Bolly aside.

"Is Jordan to be trusted, Darrit?" he asked.

"Es he is Dan Rackhoss, fer years a side-pardner ov mine, I should say—yes."

"Good enough—it is as I suspected!" Orndare exclaimed.

"But the crowd at the jail yonder is beginning to scatter. You must get under cover."

"But Little Lightning—"

"Is safe, well on the way to the camp of the Invincibles. He left the camp a half-hour ago."

"Ya-as, but ther dinged Mormon crew aire a-layin' fer him. Pepper tampered with his guns at ther jail, so thet when et comes ter ther scratch, her boyee will hev no chainece fer his white alley," protested Bolly.

"He has been warned, and is on his guard. Come—we will go up to my room. Two minutes more and you will be discovered."

The truth of this declaration was apparent. The mob, baffled at the jail, had scattered, and was now surging through the streets of the camp, creating a very Babel of confusion.

At the same instant, a note of warning came from Rackhoss, and without further delay the trio hastened to the hall entrance of the hotel.

"Pull your boots off," cautioned Orndare, pausing in the shadows. "The bartender is not to be trusted. If he hears us go up-stairs, the hotel will be searched."

A moment later the three stole noiselessly through the gloomy hallway to the foot of the stairs, and thence to the second floor, where the mine-owner halted at the door of a room facing the street.

"In with you!" he exclaimed, as the door swung open.

A lamp, with the wick turned low, burned on a table in the center of the apartment, serving only partially to dispel the gloom, and with a cursory glance at the closely-drawn curtains the two detectives helped themselves to chairs.

"Here we are snug as bugs in a rug!" quoth Orndare, locking the door and hanging his hat over the keyhole.

"Turn on the light, boys, and we'll—"

A low whistle filled the hiatus, and the mine-owner stared around in thorough surprise.

"We're in the wrong pew, boys," he exclaimed, as Bolly Darrit held the lamp aloft.

"Let's get out, or— What's that?"

"A captive, by Rockies!" ejaculated Rackhoss, gliding in the direction indicated by Orndare. "Hold the lamp a leetle nearer, Bolly."

The three men hastily crowded around the prostrate form lying in the corner, and as Darrit leaned forward a cry of astonishment burst from his lips.

"Et's Orthodox Pete!" he uttered suddenly straightening up. "Take the lamp, pards. Thar's bin foul play hyar!"

"Hist!" warned Orndare, lifting his hand. "Some one comes! Put the lamp on the table, and lie low!"

The hasty order was quickly and noiselessly obeyed, the mine-owner, revolver in hand, taking a position behind the door.

Then a key clicked in the lock, and Major Menace strode hurriedly into the room.

CHAPTER X.

THE BISHOP'S STRONGHOLD.

A GLEAM of fire leaped into the dark eyes of Jim Orndare at sight of the gambler, and without an instant's hesitation he sprung forward, clutching Menace by the throat.

In the same breath, almost, Darrit and Rackhoss arose and seized the desperado, one on each side, so that in a moment's time he was overpowered—a helpless captive!

"Hold onto him, pards," uttered Rackhoss, in a half-whisper. "I've ther handcuffs in my pocket, an' I reckon a gag won't be no great shakes ter skeer up!"

Menace ground his teeth savagely together as the irons closed about his wrists, and over his deathly-white face surged a crimson tide;

but any attempt at resistance was worse than useless, and, with the hope that his allies might quickly appear, he sullenly submitted.

A very few minutes sufficed for his captors to render his condition fully as helpless as that of Orthodox Pete, and then he was dragged aside while the victorious trio held a brief consultation.

Only a moment passed thus, then Bolly Darrit stole to the side of the captive Jehu, to remove his bonds.

Orthodox had been placed upon his side, facing the wall, but as his superior bent over him, he looked up in a quick, significant manner, readily understood by Darrit, who at once removed the gag.

Eased of that incumbrance, the Jehu attempted to speak, but failed, until his lips and throat had been moistened with a small quantity of liquor from the bottle on the table.

"Take yer time, pard," advised Darrit, as he set to work on his ally's pinions. "We'll git ye out ov hyar, an' ye kin explain arterward."

Orthodox shook his head, saying:

"Don't tech 'em, Bolly! Leave me jist as I was when ye kem in. We've struck pay-dirt at last!"

"Leave ye—pay-dirt!" ejaculated the corpulent veteran, visibly astonished. "Speak out, Pete—we aire listenin'!"

"Time's short!" grunted Orthodox, his jaws moving painfully. "On'y this: Grim, Pepper, Menace, an' Old Man Keene aire a-workin' fer thet Mormon devil, Bishop Hearne, an' I opine thet Hearne hes Orndare's gal."

"Go on!" Bolly exclaimed, as the Jehu paused.

"Yes, yes, say on, my good fellow!" cried the mine-owner, betraying extreme agitation.

"By and by, Grim an' another ov ther cohort will go ter Hearne, an' I am ter be taken along, ter be disposed ov on ther way, or later on," continued Orthodox. "Jest leave me hyar, an' then foller 'em, keepin' close enough to keep 'em from saltin' me, an' I reckon ye'll strike ther right trail."

"A job hes been putt up on Little Lightning!"

"We know all about thet," interrupted Darrit.

"Wa-al, another thing, then: Keene hes hired Rico Rube an' Peet Brown ter steal a sart'in gal. They aire ter report at his cabin in ther mornin'. Don't let 'em slip."

"Hardly!" enunciated Orndare, clinching his hands sharply.

"Now, fix me up, an' git out!" requested the captive, in conclusion. "Ye may, ef ye will, slip a we'pon inter one ov my pockets, an' then loosen my bonds so thet I kin slip out ov 'em ef need be."

"But, above all else, keep yer grip on Menace."

"Be thet all, pard?" Bolly asked, taking up the gag.

Orthodox nodded in the affirmative, and his friend at once replaced the gag, then removed and readjusted his pinions in such a way that a violent wrench would leave him free.

A revolver was then placed in the inner pocket of his coat, after which the trio prepared to leave the room.

"We'll leave everything es nigh like we found et es possible," said Darrit, turning down the light. "You lead ther way, an' Dan an' me'll bring ther major."

A hasty reconnaissance of the hallway showed that it was clear, and with due caution, the trio, with their captive, betook themselves to the room adjoining.

Just in time they were, too, for scarcely had they locked the door behind them, when a clatter on the stairs announced an approach.

"They are Mayor Grim and Marshal Pepper," quietly announced Orndare, after a searching glance through the keyhole. "They are about to enter the room we just left."

This statement accorded with the facts.

Baffled in their attempt against the life of Bolly Darrit, the Mormon leaders, after instituting a vigorous search of the camp, had returned to the hotel to counsel with Menace.

Halting at the door of his room, they gave the signal agreed upon for that night—a short, sharp cough. As no response was vouchsafed, Grim gently tried the door.

"Locked!" he muttered in disappointment, not unmixed with impatience. "Confound it! this is hardly business on the major's part."

"We'll go in, anyhow!" declared Pepper, jingling a bunch of keys. "We want a chainece ter talk matters over—must hev et!"

Within a minute the lock yielded, and the

two entered, carefully securing the door after them.

Turning up the light, Gideon Grim flung himself wearily into a chair, an example that was at once followed by Pepper.

"Wot's ther word, boss?" queried the latter worthily, after a moment's silence.

"To Hearn's, as soon as things grow a little quieter. We can do nothing here. If Darrit is found, ther boys will take care of him."

"An' Sandy Jordan, too!" suggested the marshal wrathfully. "Ther derved, deceivin' cuss."

And then the two lapsed into a silence scarcely broken during the two hours that passed ere the streets grew quiet, save by an occasional oath at the prolonged and unaccountable absence of Major Menace.

"Time's up!" cried Mayor Grim, at last, springing to his feet. "We can't possibly wait any longer. Go get the wagon, Red, and we'll set out."

With a muttered response, the marshal strode out of the room. At the expiration of twenty minutes he reappeared.

"All right, Gid!" he exclaimed hurriedly. "Quick—the way is clear. Let's bustle Orthodox out ov hyar while kiver's good."

The Mayor of Yellow Dust simply nodded his assent to the proposition, and in due course the captive Jehu was conveyed to the covered spring-wagon the marshal had left standing in the shadows at the corner of the hotel.

"I don't think any one is the wiser for this move," said Grim, with a chuckle, after a searching scrutiny of his surroundings. "We'll turn Orthodox over to the bishop, with a full enumeration of our suspicions."

"But into the wagon with you, for the night is growing old."

A moment later the spirited team sprung forward, Grim giving free rein until the two or three all-night places of the camp were passed.

"We shall likely pick up Old Man Keene, if he hasn't failed in his undertaking," observed the mayor, as they swept out of Yellow Dust on the Rocky Bar trail.

"He'd ort'er be 'long hyar sum'ers," the marshal assented.

In the mean time, the occupants of the room adjoining the apartment of Major Menace had not been idle.

No sooner had Grim and Pepper entered their ally's quarters than Darrit, in his stockings, crept out into the hall and bent his ear to the keyhole.

Thus all that passed between the two plotters was overheard, Darrit beating a stealthy retreat at the moment Pepper arose to go after the wagon.

Then, after a brief consultation, Dan Rack boss slipped out of the hotel to await the marshal's return, taking a position where he could see and not be seen.

As a result of this maneuver, when the wagon left the camp it carried with it the lank, loose-jointed spy, perched on behind, despite the precautions of Grim.

Three miles from Yellow Dust, Grim turned into a branching road, and thence, an hour later, after the way had become almost impassable, into a gloomy canyon.

Proceeding up the defile at a slow and tortuous pace for a half-mile, the wagon was halted by a mounted sentry, with the challenge:

"Hold, pilgrims! Have you the time?"

To this in cautious tones Grim replied:

"It is the hour of political power, civil and religious liberty."

The sentry drew aside, and the plotters pushed onward.

Within a hundred yards the canyon widened, opening into a splendidly wooded valley of considerable extent, and a short distance further on the wagon was halted in the shadow of a large building.

"Here we are," announced Grim, handing the reins to his companion and springing out.

"Hold on to the nags until I arouse the bishop."

"Thar he be, now," returned Pepper, as a door suddenly opened in the side of the building, permitting a long shaft of light to escape, and revealing on the threshold a man in smoking-cap and dressing-gown.

"It's Hearn, sure enough," the major responded, hastening forward.

The bishop started at the words.

"Is that you, Grim?" he exclaimed, as he peered sharply toward the wagon. "Come on—I've remained up, awaiting you."

"Where's the major?"

"Don't know," was the laconic reply.

"But he was to have come with you."

"Very true; but I suppose circumstances

compelled him to amend his plans," and, halting beside Hearn, the major briefly outlined the events of the night.

The bishop proved an attentive listener. More than once during the recital his sharp, white teeth clinched savagely.

"Orndare is making a better fight than was to have been expected," he exclaimed, at the conclusion of the narrative. "Let us fetch in the captive spy. He must unbosom himself."

The two men proceeded to the rear of the wagon, where Gideon Grim lifted the curtain and groped about inside.

He started and changed color, then withdrew his arm, and held up to view a bit of rope.

"What does that mean?" cried Hearn, explosively.

"It means," replied the Mayor of Yellow Dust, in measured tones, "simply that we have had our pains for nothing—that, despite all our precautions, Orthodox Pete has succeeded in giving us the slip, and is again at large!"

CHAPTER XI.

THROUGH THICK AND THIN.

LET US now return to the cabin of Lewis Carson—"Mose, the Hermit-Miner."

The sudden appearance of Jason Marks and his outlaw crew had chilled the stout heart of Little Lightning, for the moment rendering him fairly incapable of decisive action.

Marks was not unknown to the young ranger, and the reputation of the desperado was so thoroughly bad that the lad shrunk from the bloody conflict that seemed almost inevitable.

But it was not for himself that Little Lightning feared. Fair Rachel Carson was there, and her pure, sweet face, her grace and her beauty, had gone straight to the heart of the dashing young plainsman.

One tremor of dire apprehension as to the results possible to the presaged struggle, and then he was himself again—cool, shrewd, calculating, ready to do and to dare.

Escape by way of the door was impossible, and but one other avenue presented itself, and that problematical as to its ultimate utility.

Waiting, watching with the wariness of a hawk until the proper moment, the young ranger suddenly bounded forward and, catching up Rachel Carson, disappeared in the second room, closing and barring the door almost before Marks and his followers could realize his intentions.

Then, after a cry of defiance, he turned to Rachel saying:

"Pray do not be alarmed, Miss Carson. You shall not fall into the hands of those scoundrels without a struggle."

"Is there an available outlet to this room?"

"There is, sir," replied Rachel, in tones as guarded as Little Lightning's had been. "My father, in anticipation of an event of this kind, provided a secret avenue of escape when he built the cabin."

"Come—if you are ready to go I will show you the way."

Placing her hand on the ranger's arm, the girl led him across the floor, pausing in the corner of the room.

"Here is a skillfully-contrived trap-door, opening into a tunnel leading under the cabin," she explained, kneeling. "Descend—I will follow you."

Even as she spoke a portion of the floor swung downward. Into this opening Little Lightning carefully descended, by means of a short ladder set firmly in the wall of the cavity.

He was promptly followed by Rachel.

The next moment the trap-door swung back into place with a faint click.

"This way," murmured Rachel, groping about in the intense gloom for her companion. "Let us take up a position under the other room where we can hear all that passes above."

"Agreed," muttered Little Lightning, yielding himself to the guidance of the girl. "It is not likely that they will scent out this passage, and if they do we shall at least have the start in the race."

In accordance with this idea, the fugitives pushed ahead until they came to a second ladder leading above where Rachel stopped, saying:

"Here is the place. Directly overhead is a second trap-door, within a foot of which papa was thrown. If—"

A shock that seemed to shake the cabin to its foundation interrupted the girl.

"They have broken down the door!" Little Lightning cautiously exclaimed. "Listen!"

In the almost breathless silence of the tunnel the words of Jason Marks and his men were distinctly audible.

At the proposition to extinguish the light Little Lightning started.

"Can you open the trap from below?" he asked, laying his hand upon Rachel's arm.

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"I intend to ascend and rescue your father," was the guardedly-uttered reply. "Listen—stand ready!"

The girl obeyed, quivering in every fiber.

"Now!"

The headlong rush of the outlaws overhead effectually drowned the faint clicking of the trap, and in less than the time it takes to tell it Little Lightning was in the cabin bending over Lewis Carson.

A few deft slashes of the young plainsman's keen knife, and the Hermit-Miner staggered to his feet—free!

"Through the trap—quick!" urged the youth, as a match flared up in the adjoining room.

Little need to urge haste upon the part of Lewis Carson. His quick brain had readily grasped the situation, and his feet were upon the rungs of the ladder almost before Little Lightning's cautious strains had died away.

As noiselessly as a shadow the young ranger followed him below, then the narrow opening in the floor closed, and the rescue had been accomplished.

"Let us away, now," pursued the ranger, hurriedly as the miner wrung his hand. "Some one has entered the room. We have no time to lose!"

The next instant, as if to bear him out in the assertion, there arose a shout of alarm.

"They have discovered my unceremonious departure," muttered Carson, firmly. "Come on—I will lead the way."

Even as he spoke, he set forward, closely followed by Rachel, with Little Lightning bringing up the rear.

A dozen yards, perhaps, were thus traversed, and then the Hermit-Miner halted.

"We leave the tunnel, here," he announced.

"The question that arises is, in what direction shall we proceed?"

"My camp is not a great distance away, and my pards can be depended upon till the last," Little Lightning returned. "I would propose, sir, that we go there."

"An arrangement pre-eminently satisfactory to me, I am sure," averred the miner, quickly. "As soon as we gain the outer air, you may take the lady, sir."

A moment sufficed to see the trio clear of the underground passage, which opened into a cluster of shrubs and bushes a few paces from the end of the cabin.

"Here we are, and without a moment to spare," uttered the hermit, in a whisper, as he anxiously strove to note his surroundings. "These fellows must be tearing the house to pieces, from the racket they make. The way of our escape cannot long remain hidden."

"Remain here just a moment, sir, until I can see if our course is clear," said Little Lightning. "The presence of your daughter renders every possible precaution an imperative necessity."

"True, true."

The next minute the young ranger disappeared. A moment passed in silence, then there arose a hoarse cry of alarm, followed by the sounds of a desperate hand-to-hand conflict.

"He has been discovered!" ejaculated Rachel.

"Alas, yes! I fear that escape is out of the question," the hermit returned, as Marks and his followers came trooping out of the cabin. "Come—we will retreat in the opposite direction."

"Yes, go," came the voice of Little Lightning, in subdued tones. "It is your only chance. I'll try to run these sharks off on a false scent, and rejoin you later on."

"Brave boy!" murmured Rachel, peering over her shoulder in a vain attempt to see the face of the gallant young plainsman. "If—"

A shout of alarm from Jason Marks, answered by a note of defiance from Little Lightning, and then pandemonium seemed to have opened.

Under cover of the hurly-burly, the hermit and his daughter stole away.

And Little Lightning?

At the very moment the brave youth left the confines of the thicket the form of a huge outlaw loomed up before him, and a shout of alarm went echoing through the forest.

The next instant the prairie nomad flung himself straight at the throat of his burly foe, his strong fingers effectually cutting off a repetition of the yell.

Overthrown, borne down by that impetuous assault, the outlaw yet struggled gamely; but the clutch of that steel-like hand held good until supplemented by a succession of heavy blows

from the butt of a revolver, when he sunk back, limp and unconscious.

Not a breath too soon had this result been reached, for scarcely had Little Lightning uttered a word of warning to Lewis Carson and his daughter, when Jason Marks and his gang charged down upon him, making the woods ring with their shouts and cries.

Then up and away sped the youth, in a course directly opposite to the one taken by the hermit and Rachel, and after him surged the outlaws, yelling and firing as they ran.

It proved a fruitless chase.

Five hundred yards from the cabin, Little Lightning changed his tactics; abandoning headlong, noisy flight, he turned almost at right-angles and glided away with all the stealth of a red-skin.

"Follow me, if you can," he muttered, grimly. "Half an hour will see me with my pards, and then—"

A sort of chuckle filled the break, and the nomad paused and glanced back as if tempted to recall his pursuers to the trail.

"Time is too precious, or I'd do it!" he continued, after a moment of deliberation. "Poor old Bolly! I fear that quick, sharp work by the boys will hardly save your neck!"

Assured that his pursuers were at fault, Little Lightning cautiously resumed his way, flitting forward as noiselessly as a shadow until beyond hearing of the baffled desperado.

Then he fell into a long, free stride, threading the gloomy forest with the celerity of one thoroughly accustomed to the wilds, finally entering a dark, forbidding gorge stretching away into the hills.

A few minutes later he was halted by a shrill, boyish voice—the hail of the sentry of the Prairie Invincibles.

The camp was at once aroused. Little Lightning tersely narrated his adventures, and revealed his plans, which were instantly adopted by his followers.

Great was the wrath and indignation of the young rovers, and within twenty minutes all save Little Lightning and Kent Kane were in the saddle, ready to depart toward Yellow Dust. Bolly Darrit had long been a prime favorite with the restless, daring lads, and in defense of him they would readily have faced an army.

"Bedad! an' we're riddy," announced the foremost of the eight, a bright-looking Irish lad of eighteen or nineteen, as the cavalcade drew up before Little Lightning. "Fw'at's de worrud, captain dear?"

"On to Yellow Dust. Report to Jim Orndare at the office of the Silver Streak Mine as soon as you arrive. You are to follow his orders until I come," was the terse reply.

A semi-military salute, and the eight wheeled and rode rapidly down the gorge.

"Now, Kent," cried Little Lightning, tightening his belt as he turned to his brother, "fetch up our horses while I get the dog in trim for trailing."

"You will take the trail at once?"

"Without the loss of a minute, Kent. I can't rest until I learn the fate of Rachel Carson!"

"The invulnerable has been pierced," muttered Kent Kane, with an odd smile, as he hurried away. "The smiles of a 'gal' have accomplished more than the wiles of red-skins and outlaws combined. Dave's heart has been stolen!"

It required but little time for the brothers to leave the gorge. Once in the timber, Little Lightning, with unerring precision, laid his course for the cabin of the Hermit-Miner, which was reached in due time.

The place was dark, silent, deserted.

After a hasty inspection of the premises, Little Lightning led the way to the clump of bushes hiding the mouth of the secret passage.

There the dog was brought into action, the well-trained animal lifting the trail and pushing forward silently and steadily, closely followed by the brothers, alert and watchful.

A half-hour passed thus; then, just within the edge of a heavy growth of young timber, the sagacious brute suddenly recoiled, uttering a low, ominous growl.

In the same breath, in a voice deep, stern and harsh, came the hail:

"Halt! Advance a step and you are dead men!"

Little Lightning drew his weapons.

"Stand ready, Kent!" he exclaimed, just audibly. "It is Jason Marks and his band of Mormon outlaws!"

CHAPTER XII.

AFFAIRS AT THE BISHOP'S.

WRATH, consternation and despair, in turn,

seized upon Bishop Hearne at Mayor Grim's announcement that Orthodox Pete had escaped from the wagon.

"Hol! hol! Alf!—Jabel!—Reddy! Out—turn out, every mother's son of ye!" he roared, madly, as he ground the severed pinions under his heel and started toward the house. "Scour the place! Scour the pass! Look high and low till ye find the devil's imp of a detective!"

Then, flinging up his hands as two men came rushing from the house.

"Rouse up the boys—quick! ye devils! A captive has escaped! If he slips us we are ruined!"

Instantly the men separated, darting away in opposite directions, leaving the bishop swearing and fuming in impotent wrath.

Promptly enough, the adherents of Hearne turned out, and in less than five minutes they were approaching from all directions, to the number of a dozen.

"You, Injun Nickerson—you!" screamed the bishop, exultantly, as he sighted a lank, hard-looking figure among the men hurrying up. "Back—back, and bring up the dogs!"

The order was instantly obeyed.

"Six of you go down the pass," Hearne continued, as the men gathered around him. "A detective spy has escaped from the wagon there; and we must have him at all hazards, dead or alive—alive if you can take him."

"Away—away!" and another burst of profanity followed the words.

Injun Nickerson was but a moment appearing with his dogs.

An evil-looking rascal he was, too—lank and cadaverous, poorly dressed, armed with knife and revolvers; a full-blooded Indian, with the vices of his race multiplied and intensified through long and intimate association with recreant white men.

A cunning fellow, too, was the red-skin—just the man for the job in hand, as Hearne well knew.

"This way, Nickerson," exclaimed the bishop, turning to the wagon, as the Indian came up. "A prisoner has escaped—go after him with your dogs."

"Um! Whar?"

For a moment Hearne was nonplused.

"Where?" he demanded, turning to Mayor Grim.

"Some time after we had entered the pass," returned that miscreant, after brief but profound reflection. "We had the fellow all right when we made the turn."

"Hyar's ther cuss's head-gear," cried Pepper, from his perch on the wagon, holding up an old slouch hat. "Reckon Ole Nick an' his critters kin strike ther scent from it."

"You bet!" the red-skin exclaimed, eagerly seizing the trophy. "Dog run um down heap soon, now, mebbe."

"Away with you, then," gritted the bishop. "You can get all the help you want from the boys down the pass."

"And you fellows," turning to his remaining followers as the Indian darted away, "must secrete yourselves in the undergrowth surrounding the house. Permit no one to approach without the word."

"Reddy, attend to the team."

Then, accompanied by Grim and Pepper, Hearne turned toward the house—a large, barn-like structure of two stories, designed with an eye to strength rather than to architectural beauty.

Straight to the library strode the bishop, where with scant ceremony he rested his allies and helped himself to a liberal potation.

"Boys, we are in a bad boat," he asseverated, sinking back into a comfortable chair. "Orndare is proving more than a match for us. We must get possession of the Silver Streak, and at once!"

"Jump ther claim?" asked Pepper.

"No; buy it."

Mayor Grim nodded sagely.

"That's the way to do it," he declared.

"I would never do to attempt to jump the Silver Streak. It would give the whole scheme dead away."

"And put our necks in jeopardy," added the bishop, grimly. "No, I have thought the matter over, and I think that I see the way clear," and sinking his voice almost to a whisper he proceeded to disclose his plans.

Though fully as hazardous as villainous, they met with the ready approval of the two Yellow Dust officials.

"The only thing in the way is that cursed detective," said Hearne, in conclusion. "If he succeeds in getting back to Yellow Dust, you fellows will be mighty apt to strike a snag."

"We'll risk that," returned the mayor, as he and Pepper rose to depart. "You may look for us to report to-morrow night."

"Very well."

That was all. The two officials left the room, the bishop remaining half-buried in his easy-chair.

"Fools! dolts!" he muttered, springing half erect, as the opening and closing of the outer door announced their departure from the house. "Do they seek to hide their uneasiness from me? Then let them not flatter themselves, for I know all!"

Hearne's resemblance to Old Man Keene, at that moment, was absolutely startling.

Draining another brimming glass of liquor, the plotter locked the door and retreated to his chair, in the luxurious depths of which he was soon soundly sleeping.

Just as the sun rose over the hills east of the valley, he awoke and sprang to his feet, shivering as if chilled to the marrow.

One sweeping glance at his surroundings, and then he hurriedly left the library, hastening through the hall to the foot of the stairway, up which he bounded two steps at a time.

At the head of the stairs was a second hallway, running lengthwise of the house, and along this he hastened, stopping at the door of a corner apartment.

After a sharp, peremptory knock, which elicited no response, Hearne nervously opened a small sliding-panel in the door and peered through.

"Safe, after all!" he muttered, with a breath of relief. "Confound these dreams! If they continue I shall go mad!"

Then, with just noticeable hesitancy, he drew a key from his pocket, unlocked the door, and entered the room.

Its occupant was a girl—a girl not beyond the age of seventeen, and of wondrous loveliness.

Of slight, trim figure, yet giving promise of splendid womanhood; a pure oval face, perfect in feature, illumined by fine black eyes; a proud little head, crowned with lustrous, long black hair—these were the more patent features of the seeming vision that greeted Hearne as he crossed the threshold.

"Good-morning, Miss Orndare," he exclaimed, halting just within the room and inclining himself with an air almost reverential. "I am happy to see you looking so cheerful this day of all others!"

The captive, quietly ignoring the bishop, turned to the window.

"For this is the day you are to become the sixth Mrs. Hearne," he continued, a shade of annoyance crossing his face, a steely ring creeping into his voice. "Some time during the afternoon my esteemed co-laborer, the Reverend Bishop Skinwell, of Utah, will arrive, and shortly afterward the ceremony will take place. So prepare yourself, my dear; for, although the affair will be private, yet it is my wish that—"

The girl suddenly confronted him, her black eyes flashing fire, and the words died away in a hollow gurgle.

"Get out!" exclaimed Millie Orndare, her voice sinking to a low, intense strain, as she pointed to the door. "Go!"

Bishop Hearne started, and his liquor-flushed face grew whiter.

In the girl's small white hand, leveled at his head, was a self-cocking revolver!

"Treachery! or the women have bungled!" he muttered, and bowing low he left the room.

Scarcely had he locked the door and restored the key to his pocket, when a loud call rung out in the hallway below.

CHAPTER XIII.

PURSUED.

OLD Dan Rackhoss was not long in realizing that the task he had taken upon himself was no light one.

Marshal Pepper was a reckless driver, and, as the trail was anything but smooth, it was with the greatest difficulty that the veteran detective succeeded in keeping his perch.

But the end to be gained was an important one, and Rackhoss clung to the wagon until his arms seemed to have lost the power of feeling.

Then the canyon was reached, and he knew that the end of the secret journey was near.

Lowering his feet to the ground, he trotted silently along in the rear of the wagon, stealthily loosening the curtain and opening the "gate," so that he might extricate Orthodox Pete without the loss of an instant when the critical moment arrived.

Scarcely had these preliminary moves been

completed, when a hail rung out and the wagon came to a stop.

Without loss of time, Rackhoss severed the pinions confining the captive's ankles, then cautiously lifted him from the bottom of the vehicle and glided away in the darkness.

A more propitious moment for the rescue could hardly have been chosen.

With suspicions unaroused, the two officials drove onward, and the sentry resumed his beat.

At a distance of fifty yards down the canyon, Rackhoss paused and placed Orthodox upon his feet, then removed the pinions from his wrists.

The cramped limbs of the Jehu almost refused to support his weight, and but for the assistance of Rackhoss he would have been unable to continue the retreat.

Their progress was painfully slow, at best, and they had not yet reached the mouth of the canyon when an uproar a half-mile in their rear apprised them that the escape had been discovered.

"That means bizness, pard," muttered Orthodox, vigorously chafing his wrists. "Ef I don't miss my guess, they'll be arter us hot-foot 'fore long."

"Wal, let 'em come," Rackhoss returned, complacently. "Ef they git us, they're welcome to us."

Nevertheless, the two men quickened their pace, and in a few minutes quitted the canyon.

And just at that juncture there was wafted to their ears a sound that carried to the very souls of each a chill of terror.

It was the deep long-drawn baying of a blood-hound!

Little need to ask whence it came!

Bishop Hearne had organized a pursuit—and such a pursuit as neither had for a moment dreamed of!

"This is rough, pard," exclaimed Old Dan Rackhoss. "We've got ter git right out ov this an' find a place whar we kin make a stand. No use ter try ter shake that feller—we've jest got ter throw 'im cold!"

"We hev, fer a mortal fack!" Orthodox grunted. "Strike fer ther timmer, Dan—I'll—Jest listen ter that!"

There was a faint tremor in the voice of the veteran man-hunter, and his hand closed firmly upon his comrade's arm.

The bay of the hound had suddenly swelled to a grand and awful chorus—the chorus of a pack in full cry!

Not a word passed between the two. As if each divined the other's thoughts, they dashed deeper into the timber, Orthodox, in his well-founded alarm, forgetful of his bodily condition.

Louder grew the sounds, and mingled with the baying of the dogs could be heard the voice of Injun Nickerson, urging on his pack.

"They're gainin' on us, pard—fast!" grated Rackhoss, through his hard-set teeth, as they darted down a sharp slope. "We'd better make a stand afore we're clean gone—think?"

Orthodox turned his head slightly, as if about to reply. At the same instant his feet struck a projecting root and he fell, to roll swiftly to the bottom of the slope.

A sudden splash followed the abrupt descent, bringing an exultant cry to the lips of Old Dan Rackhoss!

"Water! by the holy mack'rel!" he ejaculated, gleefully, and the next minute he was up to his knees in a small, swiftly-flowing stream.

Orthodox, drenched to the skin, had already gained his feet.

"Which way, pard?" he muttered, in husky tones, as he shook himself vigorously. "Up or down? Hyar's our chainece, but I'm too 'fusticated ter know which way ter turn—dang et!"

"Up," hurriedly returned Rackhoss, catching his companion's arm. "They'll go down, ter head us off from Yaller Dust. Move along now, quiet, but lively!"

"Be ye'r we'pon all right?"

"All right, ef ther ca'tridges—"

"Hyar's fresh 'uns—waterproof, too. Slip 'em in."

The revolver was quickly reloaded, and then the two moved forward rapidly, but in utter silence.

Their pursuers were now near at hand, and an incautious word or a careless step would prove fatal to the two detectives.

A moment later Injun Nickerson, with a gigantic hound in leash, halted on the brink of the stream.

Directly behind him were four more of Hearne's clan, each with an ugly-looking dog in hand.

"Um!—debbil—water!" grunted the red-skin,

pointing down as he glanced over his shoulder. "Dog heap no good now!"

The logic of Nickerson's remark was at once attested by a volley of curses.

"Better divide an' go down-stream, a party on each side," suggested one of the men, after a moment of deliberation. "The cuss will be sure ter head fer Yaller Dust."

"That's the talk," another cried.

"Mebbe, mebbe not," objected yet another, rather shrewder than his fellows. "These hyar detectives aire durned cute galoots sometimes. W'ot ef he's looked fer jest sech a game, an' turned up-stream?"

"He'd either escape, or lead us a long chase," slowly declared the last man of the party, until that moment silent. "Zeb is right, pards. Our best plan is to separate, two men goin' up-stream, one on either side with a dog, an' two down in ther same way, leavin' ther fifth man hyer. What say?"

The proposition met with unanimous approval, Zeb, with one of the dogs, being stationed at the point where the trail entered the water.

In the mean time Rackhoss and Orthodox had been wading cautiously up-stream. The swiftness of the current impeded their progress not a little. Their movements were painfully slow.

About two hundred yards had been traversed, when the banks of the stream suddenly changed in aspect, looming up to a height of many feet.

"By George! pardner," exclaimed Rackhoss, in dismay, "we'll have ter leave ther water!"

"We cain't do et hyar," Orthodox returned, positively.

"But ef we push on, et may be miles before we kin leave ther pass."

"Better thet than ther chainece ov a tussle with 'em thar dogs," the Jehu persisted, and so they again pushed onward.

No sooner were they fairly within the jaws of the canyon, however, than a fresh difficulty presented itself.

The water increased in depth so rapidly as they advanced that at the end of a dozen yards they were compelled to halt.

"We're at ther end ov our string in this direction—less we swim," admitted Orthodox, lugubriously. "I feel a tech ov cramp, too."

"Nary swim," Rackhoss muttered, facing about. "We'll leave ther drink an' trust ter luck."

"Wait!"

As he breathed the word, Orthodox laid his hand warningly upon his companion's arm.

It was a timely precaution.

The next instant a quick, restless patter came from the banks of the stream, announcing the approach of pursuers from below.

"They've split up, an' aire beatin' ther banks ov ther crick, up an' down," Rackhoss uttered, in a whisper.

"Let 'em go! They cain't see us from above."

Bending low over the surface of the stream, the two detectives waited until their pursuers had passed out of hearing, then turned and retraced their steps, leaving the water just below the mouth of the canyon.

"Which way?" asked Orthodox, as they shook the water from their clothing.

"Down crick—et'll take us within a mile ov Yaller Dust," was the reply. "Ef we kin reach ther camp afore day, well an' good; if we fail, we shell hev ter lay out till ter-morrow night."

The Jehu muttered a response, and then with stealthy steps they took their way forward.

Five minutes passed thus, and then came an interruption.

A low, fierce growl, the clicking of a pistol-lock, and up from the shadows at their feet rose a tall, gaunt form, sending yell after yell of alarm pealing through the depths of the forest.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE HERMIT'S STORY.

A FULL minute of intense silence followed the hurried warning of Little Lightning to his brother Kent, as they halted in response to that stern challenge:

"Halt! Advance a step, and you are dead men!"

The voice was that of Jason Marks, and the presence of himself and his men at that point, boded ill to the hermit and his daughter.

"They, too, are on the trail," thought Little Lightning, wrathfully, as he sought shelter behind a tree. "The longer they are compelled to remain here, the better Rachel's chances to escape!"

Much the same idea seemed to possess Kent, too, for he silently followed his brother's example in seeking shelter, and, revolvers in hand, with the dog crouching at his heels, he patiently waited an attack.

But it came not.

In its stead there was a momentary rustling of the undergrowth, and then all was still.

Two minutes passed.

"Kent!" exclaimed Little Lightning, in an undertone.

"Well, Davy?" was the cautious response.

"We have been tricked!"

"Yes—by whom?"

"By Lewis Carson, I suspect. It is not likely that Marks would attempt to evade a struggle."

"No, to the contrary."

"But what do you propose, Davy? The matter can't rest in its present shape."

"Put Rover forward; if there's any one in the brush, he'll nose 'em out."

"True enough; but it's hardly necessary for you to trouble yourselves, gentlemen!" interpolated a harsh voice behind them. "In fact, I may say that it will save trouble all around if you remain perfectly quiet. You are surrounded—completely hemmed in, and an attempt to use a weapon will be the signing of your death-warrants!"

The young rangers started sharply. The significance of the mocking words was by no means lost upon them.

They had permitted themselves to be tricked, and Jason Marks now held the winning hand.

"It's a hard line, Kent," muttered Little Lightning audibly, as he leaned over and pulled the dog to him. "A hard line, sure, and we've nothing left, I reckon, but to throw up the sponge!"

"That's good hoss-sense!" exclaimed Jason Marks, stepping out from his covert and advancing—a movement that was quickly imitated by his followers. "Ye've a level head on ye, my lad."

"Thanks, Captain Marks," Little Lightning returned, in easy strains. "But—wait! Just a moment, please."

"At him, Rover!—Sic!"

A sudden flurry of the leaves, a single rush, and with a wolfish snarl, the great brute was upon Mark, bearing him down and tearing at his throat with the fury of a mountain lion.

Horried at this unexpected turn of affairs, the outlaw's followers surged forward to his rescue, for the moment forgetful of the instigators of the attack; and in that moment of confusion, Little Lightning and Kent Keene quickly slipped away, keeping well within the shadow marking the edge of the thicket.

Nor was Rover far behind them. Aided by the sagacious brute, they again picked up the trail of Lewis Carson and his daughter, and pushed forward at a rapid pace.

The expiration of an hour found them at the bottom of a gloomy ravine, opening at right angles into a pass, and there the dog came to a halt before a mass of vines at the base of a towering bluff.

"Rover is not at fault," averred Little Lightning, in a low tone. "Carson and his daughter are hidden here. These vines conceal the entrance to a cave of some sort."

"You certainly are not far wrong, my young friend," came a voice from behind the leafy screen, and the next instant the hermit-miner stepped into view.

"Permit me to thank you, Little Lightning, for your gallant service in behalf of my daughter and myself," he continued, extending his hand. "But for your timely assistance, we must ere this have been helpless in the hands of that rascally Mormon Bishop Hearne."

"I certainly am pleased to know that I have been of service to you and your daughter," responded Little Lightning; but, as there is a strong possibility that some of the bishop's desperate cohort may appear at any moment, permit me to suggest the advisability of getting under cover."

By way of return, Carson parted the natural screen of vines, and motioned the young rangers to enter.

"It is a small cave—a mere pocket under a bluff," he explained, as he followed them; but, as it offers a snug temporary retreat I have decided to remain here until Captain Marks and his men have left the vicinity."

"Rachel!"

"Here, papa," and with the words a slight form glided out from the darker nooks of the gloomy recess.

"I have brought in our gallant rescuer, Little Lightning, and one of his friends," pursued the

hermit. "You may conduct them into the inner cave for the present, while I remain on guard here."

"Allow me to amend that," said the ranger, quickly. "Let me put Rover here on duty."

"He is to be trusted?"

"He has been trusted at a hundred camps, and red-skin nor outlaw ever proved wily enough to pass him."

"Then he shall be our sentry," Carson declared, in evident relief.

Accordingly, Little Lightning posted the dog fast within the network of vines, and then the little party withdrew to the inner cavern, where the hermit busied himself with the preparation of a light, while Rachel, her hand nestling in the palm of her rescuer and hero, poured forth her thanks.

A moment sufficed for Carson to bring forth and light a lantern, and then, when Little Lightning had formally introduced Kent, the party proceeded to make themselves as comfortable as possible in the barren cavern.

"The attack of to-night was by no means a surprise to me," averred Carson, breaking a lull in the conversation. "I have suspected for some time past that Bishop Hearne would make just such a descent, but hoped to get beyond his reach ere he could gather his forces."

"You are about to quit the vicinity, then?" queried Kent, while Little Lightning's face fell.

"Yes, sir; for two years past I have been located here, working a silver deposit; lately it has shown signs of being pretty well exhausted, and that, with the appearance in the neighborhood of these Mormon vandals, has led me to seek another location."

"I have heard of this Bishop Hearne quite frequently of late," observed Little Lightning. "Do you know the location of his stronghold, Mr. Carson?"

"Yes; we are within two miles of it at this moment," was the reply of the hermit.

"If reports be true, he is a sort of brigand," pursued the ranger.

"A born mercenary cut-throat if one ever existed," the hermit returned, emphatically. "I know him of old. He strikes at me and mine through motives of revenge."

"Oh! you have been enemies?"

"Yes; but, to show you, however, that I am not unduly biased, or prejudiced, I will relate my previous experience with the scoundrel."

"That is hardly necessary, Mr. Carson," Little Lightning affirmed, readily. "We are quite willing to believe that you were in the right."

"It is better told," persisted the hermit, with glowing eyes. "To be brief:

"My name is Lewis Carson, and I am a Kentuckian, of old and good family. My home, from boyhood to manhood, was near Maysville, Kentucky, where my father owned a large and valuable plantation.

"My mother died ere I was a year old. My father never married again, dying shortly after I had reached the age of nineteen and leaving me heir to his estate.

"My only remaining relative was a second cousin—Helen Elder, a beautiful girl of my own age, and at that time a resident of Maysville.

"Rumor had it that she was plighted to a youthful planter, whose estate adjoined mine, and who had for years been my warmest friend.

"But into their Eden crept the serpent, in the guise of one St. Leger Clarkson, a wealthy adventurer, who shortly before had purchased a fine property just out of Maysville.

"To cut the matter short, the Bishop Hearne of to-day is none other than the Clarkson of that date.

"The scoundrel fell desperately in love with Helen, and through his machinations the lovers quarreled, I was forced into challenging James Orndare, and killed him."

"Orndare!" repeated Little Lightning.

"Yes, James Orndare, the young planter to whom Helen had been betrothed," Carson continued. "It was all a deep-laid scheme on the part of Clarkson, and he succeeded only too well.

"I fled to the West. A year later, by a strange chance, I discovered the duplicity of Clarkson, and at once wrote to Helen, inclosing indisputable evidence of his guilt.

"Since that time I have been a hermit-miner, shunning the world, hiding from my sin. Less than a week ago I discovered Hearne's identity, as well as the fact that I was under the surveillance of his spies. What the end will be, I know not; but upon one point I am determined—if Hearne and myself meet, one of us must die!"

"Death would not be too great a punishment in such a case," declared Little Lightning, who had listened with deep interest to the hermit's narrative.

"May I ask you to describe James Orndare?"

"Certainly; he was tall and spare, very erect, and of military carriage, with piercing black eyes and straight black hair."

"Did you ever receive a reply to your letter to Miss Helen Elder?"

"No; as soon as I had dispatched it, I left the vicinity, taking especial care to cover my trail."

"Did it ever occur to you that you had made a mistake—that Orndare was not killed?"

"No; my bullet struck him just above the heart. There is not one chance in ten thousand that he recovered."

"And yet he did not die!" asseverated Little Lightning, with due solemnity. "James Orndare is alive and well at this moment. Why, I shook hands with him not five hours ago!"

The hermit gasped, and his skin turned to a deathly white.

"Impossible!" he muttered, incoherently. "You mock me."

"Indeed I do not," protested the ranger. "He is not only alive, but in Yellow Dust. He is the owner of the Silver Streak Mine."

"My God! it cannot be! There is a mistake somewhere!" Carson cried, in a voice tremulous with emotion, while Rachel, similarly agitated, arose and softly slipped her arms about his neck.

"No—listen: Orndare has a daughter; a short time ago she disappeared—was abducted. What more likely than that Hearne struck the blow?"

The hermit remained silent, his head bowed down. A minute slipped by; then he arose.

"Thank Heaven!" he fervently ejaculated, his eyes glowing with a new light. "You are right—Orndare's blood is not upon my head! Hearne, in his devilish malignity, has overreached himself, and all is clear at last! But for the attack to-night I would have fled—would have gone down to my grave haunted by a crime never actually committed!"

"It is Providence," said Little Lightning, with a grave smile.

"It is Providence!" Carson echoed, extending his hands to the youth. "What else could have induced me to reveal to you, a stranger, the story of my sufferings—a story that has never passed my lips, save to Rachel here and her sainted mother!"

"We shall never forget you, Mr. Kane," added Rachel, in a low, joyous voice, her fair face flushing as her blue eyes met the dark orbs of the young ranger with a tender glow. "Never, never!"

"That assurance is happiness enough for—"

"Hark!" interrupted Kent, suddenly springing to his feet.

The next instant Rover appeared at the entrance of the inner cavern.

"That means danger," Little Lightning declared. "Remain here, Mr. Carson. Come, Kent."

"That young man is worth his weight in gold!" declared the hermit, drawing his daughter to his breast as the two rangers glided into the outer cave. "I would have trusted him with my life the moment I set eyes on him!"

"As would I," Rachel murmured, burying her face against her father's shoulder to hide a vivid blush.

Little Lightning and Kent were absent but a moment.

When they re-entered the cave, they brought with them a most singular-looking personage.

A man, rather tall, lean almost to emaciation, with mild blue eyes, long, straight red hair and great red beard.

His high white hat was rusty and dingy, as was his clerical suit of black. In his right hand he carried an old carpet-bag, in the left a demijohn.

"Good-even, lades an' gen'lemen!" he ejaculated, nodding and blinking gravely at Rachel and her father. "Happy to meet you, 'm sure!"

"Reckon you don't 'zactly know me, eh? No, s'pose not! But I'm a howlin' terror from head-waters, I am! Don't you fergit it! I'm Steele Skinwell, the Silent, I am, an' a right reveren' bishop of the Mormon chnrch, too!"

"On my way to a wed—weddin'—wed—"

The outburst, broken by sundry hiccoughs, had proceeded thus far, when the "bishop's" limbs suddenly gave way beneath him, and the two rangers stretched him at full length on the sandy floor.

"Floored by the demijohn!" exclaimed Kent with a chuckle.

CHAPTER XV.

KENT'S BOLD VENTURE.

LITTLE LIGHTNING stepped aside, accompanied by Carson.

"What is the meaning of this?" the hermit asked, with a gesture to indicate the drunken bishop. "Why have you fetched him here?"

"To learn what he knows," was the guarded reply. "He had fallen from his horse just beyond the cave entrance, and lay muttering something about Bishop Hearne and a wedding."

"Then, too, as Captain Marks and his men are as likely to pass this way as any other, it seemed hardly the part of wisdom to leave the wretch there to attract their attention."

"By no means," Carson assented. "But tell me, what is it you suspect concerning Hearne?"

"Simply that he has carried Orndare's daughter to his stronghold, with the intention of forcing her into marriage."

"At which ceremony Skinwell is to officiate?"

"Exactly. And if I can twist the truth out of this Skinwell I shall be in a fair way to thwart Hearne."

"Then I pray Heaven that you may succeed!" cried the hermit, earnestly. "Let us to work at once."

"I am ready," Little Lightning responded.

"I would suggest, however, that you and your daughter withdraw to the outer cave. If this fellow is really Steele Skinwell, the Silent, he is likely to prove a rough customer."

Carson uttered an assent, and forthwith conducted his daughter to the outer cave. The two rangers then set to work.

The bishop had fallen into a drunken sleep. Kneeling, Little Lightning shook him roughly.

"Rouse up, old man," he exclaimed. "You won't get through to-night! Bishop Hearne—"

A muttered ejaculation filled the hiatus, and, bending yet lower, the ranger peered sharply at Skinwell's face.

"The fellow is in disguise," he declared, starting up. "Both hair and beard are false!"

"Then it behooves us all to see the wolf divested of his fleece," said Kent, bending over the bishop.

It was the work of but a moment to strip off the beard and the wig, revealing a bald head and a face fairly seamed with scars.

"The disguise was harmless—worn for beauty's sake," Kent remarked, smilingly, as he laid the articles aside. "But lay hold, Davy; we'll get the galoot upon his feet."

"Yes, for he must be made to talk," returned Little Lightning.

The task, however, proved too much for them. Try as they would, all they could glean from Skinwell's maudlin utterances was that he was on his way to Bishop Hearne's, where he was to officiate at a wedding.

"We'll have to give it up," said Little Lightning, in disgust. "The rascal is soaked so full of whisky that he couldn't tell a straight story if he wanted to."

"We'll bind and gag him, and when he is sober enough to talk maybe we can find a way to draw out the truth."

"There is a quicker way than that," declared Kent. "As you have pledged our assistance to Orndare, the sooner we strike the right trail the better."

"That is true enough; but what have you in view?"

"I propose to become—for the time being—Steele Skinwell, the Silent, and beard the jackal, otherwise Hearne, in his den!"

Little Lightning started.

"It is too risky," he protested. "The cheat would be detected, and your life would not be worth a pinch of snuff!"

"Trust me to pull through," was the smiling response. "I have this wig and the beard, his clothing and effects, and his horse. If my make-up proves weak, I shall give up the plan."

Little Lightning yielded the point, and the two went to work with a will. Within twenty minutes Kent declared himself ready to depart. Then Skinwell was carried some distance into an out-of-the-way passage.

"Call Carson," said Kent, taking up the carpet-bag and demijohn, and assuming the air of drunken gravity. "We'll give the matter a fair test, here and now."

A moment later, the hermit appeared in response to a call from Little Lightning.

"Mr. Carson, will you please to direct Bishop Skinwell to Hearne's stronghold?" the young ranger asked, his hand resting upon the shoulder of the bogus Mormon as if to steady him. "He has decided to push on, and in the interest of all I have sanctioned his departure."

"Certainly, if it is your desire," replied Car-

son, and he proceeded to give the instructions asked for.

Little Lightning then accompanied Kent to the canyon.

"Let us part here," said the latter, as the vines closed behind them. "I know exactly where to find the house."

"And now, good-by, Davy! If I am not back by an hour after daylight, go after the boys and have them ride straight for the stronghold. Carson will act as guide, I dare say."

"Good-by, Kent! Take care of yourself!"

"As ever," was the careless response, and then the brothers parted.

"Where is your brother, Little Lightning?" queried Carson, as the ranger re-entered the cave.

"Gone, Mr. Carson."

"Gone?—when?"

"A moment ago, to reconnoiter Hearne's stronghold."

"And Skinwell?"

"Remains in the rear of the cave, bound hand and foot. Kent has simply usurped his title for a time."

"Impossible!" ejaculated the hermit, in visible astonishment. "I never would have detected the imposture!"

"Nor will Hearne, unless he is intimately acquainted with this Skinwell," Little Lightning declared.

In the mean time, Kent Kane had made his way to the spot where he had tethered the bishop's horse. Mounting, he rode slowly away, following Carson's instructions as nearly as possible, and in a short while arrived in the vicinity of Hearne's place.

Dismounting, he tethered the horse in a secluded spot near the mouth of the pass leading into the valley. Creeping past the sentinel unobserved, he made his way without mishap into the valley proper. Stopping beside a small thicket, he made as thorough a survey of the house and its surroundings as the darkness would permit.

"A light down-stairs, front, and another up-stairs, rear," he muttered. "If Miss Orndare is in either of the rooms, it is the upper one."

Leaving his sheltered position, Kent proceeded to the rear of the house, where, at a distance of forty or fifty feet from the building proper, he again paused. Then:

"Hallo, thar! Don't tromp on a feller, pard!" and up from the ground rose a lank form, confronting the startled lad as suddenly as an apparition. "What d'ye mean, a-prowlin' round off yer beat? Sa-ay, you—"

The querulous tones ceased abruptly. A hand dropped heavily upon Kent's shoulder, and a pair of wickedly-glittering eyes stared hard at his face.

"Ef 'tain't, dern me! Howdy, Bishop?"

The die was cast!

Mechanically, Kent dropped the carpet-bag and extended his hand.

"Fair to middlin', Rocky—it's Rocky, ain't it?" he returned, in a thick tone, broken with his coughs.

"Nary Rocky—et's Jerry Sulkan ye're talkin' to," the sentry replied. "Bin tankin' up right smart, hain't ye, bish?"

"Solacin' the inner man a trifle, sir," was the stiffly-uttered reply, and the demijohn changed hands.

"Et's prime stuff," declared Sulkan, after a lingering look at the stars. "Kinder celebratin' ther weddin' aforehand, bean't ye?"

"Rejoicin' at my friend's good fortune, somewhat," and Kent made a pretense of taking a long pull. "Good-lookin' gal, they say."

"You bet—slashin'! Black eyes an' hair, an' es purty es a peach pie. Thet's her room up thar—ther one with ther light."

"I've forgotten her name."

"Orndare."

"That's it," and Kent again passed the demijohn. "An' where's the bishop?"

"Snootin' in ther library," replied Sulkan,

after a sigh expressive of supreme contentment. "I reckon thar's bin ther devil ter pay this night, an' we're all used up, ther boss included."

"In what way?"

"Oh, ginerally. Ter begin with, sum ov ther bishop's heelers down at Yaller Dust snared one ov Orndare's detectives an' undertook ter bring him inter camp; but, sumwhar down ther pass he made his escape, an' Injun Nickerson an' his hounds hev bin out fer two hours tryin' ter run 'im down."

"Then, too, earlier in ther night, afore ther bishop hed gotten home, Cap Marks an' a squad left ter bring in Mose, ther Hermit-Miner, an' a gal, livin' over in ther hills two or three miles from hyar, an' they hev'n't got in yet, though they're more'n two hours overdue."

"We must learn to bear such trials, though they go mightily against the spirit," Kent observed, sighing mournfully. "Hit it again, brother; it's the balm in Gilead, an' as free as water to the faithful."

"Thankee, boss; et do take ther wire aidge off'n a hard night's work."

"By George! I'd like a peep et that gal!" the bogus bishop exclaimed, with a sudden animation, after a moment's silence. "She's up an' stirrin'."

"Ye shell hev et, Pard Bishop," declared Sulkan, warmly. "Le's see; thar's a shed roof runnin' up under ther window, an' I'll guv ye a lift onter et, ef ye'r's steady enough on yer pins ter make et from thet p'int up. What say?"

"Steady, say you? Try me an' see!" hic-coughed Kent, as if indignant at the imputation.

With a muttered apology, the gangling rough led the way toward the building. The back end of the shed was not more than seven feet in height, and it required but a slight exertion upon the part of Sulkan to place the reckless young ranger upon the roof.

"Be keerful, bishop," warned the rough, eagerly seizing the demijohn, for the possession of which he had risked his chief's direst displeasure. "Sev'ral ov ther boys aire posted in the grounds, an' ef they see ye, yer cake is dough—ef ye git off so easy!"

With a muttered response, Kent crept cautiously up the roof, keeping outside the belt of light. A moment sufficed for him to reach the window, which was provided with stout bars.

A pane in the lower corner of the sash had been badly cracked. A gentle, yet steady, push with the point of his knife dislodged a piece of glass, which rattled to the floor within.

"Miss Orndare! Miss Orndare!" he exclaimed, in a low, penetrating voice, placing his mouth as near the aperture just created as the bars would permit.

A rustling sound, a quick, light step, apprised the young ranger that he had been heard. Then, in a guarded, yet musical voice, came the query:

"Who speaks?"

"A friend! Turn down the light—low, and come nearer the window."

The request met with a prompt compliance.

"Help is at hand," pursued Kent, gazing eagerly at the outlines of the white, wan face just discernible in the darkness. "Keep up your spirits. Before the day is gone you shall be restored to your friends."

"Heaven bless you for that assurance," was the earnest, low-voiced response. "May I ask your name, and if you came from my father?"

"My name is Kane—Kent Kane. My presence here is due to an accident, but I shall go direct to your father, with full information as to your whereabouts."

"Can you open the window?"

"I can hoist the sash a few inches."

"Then I will leave you a revolver. Use it in defense of yourself without scruple, if need be," and Kent placed the weapon in the slim white hand extended.

"And now, good-by—for the present," continued the ranger. "It is growing light in the east, and I must get out of this infernal stronghold before daybreak, if at all."

"Good-by."

Impulsively, his heart beating wildly, Kent raised to his lips the hand laid confidently in his. Then the window softly closed, and, with due caution, he descended from the shed.

No sooner was he fairly upon his feet, after dropping to the ground, however, than he was confronted by Sulkan.

"See hyar," exclaimed that worthy, with a menacing inflection, as he suddenly presented his revolver, his eyes gleaming wrathfully, "you stop—bishop! Yer little game's played out!"

"Played out!" echoed Kent, in well simulated astonishment.

"Thet's w'ot I sed," affirmed the rough, grimly. "Ye've played et purty slick, too, 'cept on one leetle p'int!"

"And that?"

"Steele Skinwell, ther Silent, carries a close tongue; but you—"

The ruffian laughed outright.

He had detected the imposture—but too late! The next instant, Kent, hazarding all upon a bold stroke, dashed aside the weapon and sprang forward, raining down blow after blow with the heavy butt of his clubbed revolver.

CHAPTER XVI.

DESPERATE MEASURES.

"PERDITION!" grated Old Dan Rackhoss, savagely, as yell after yell of alarm rung through

the forest. "Take keer ov ther dorg, Orthodox—I'll fetch ther two-laiged kiote a thump an' a belt in a holy minnit!"

Ere the hoarse strains had ceased, the affray was begun in deadly earnest. Shot after shot rung out from either side, while from up the stream, and down, came yells of encouragement to the stubbornly battling outlaw.

At the first fire, as luck would have it, the huge dog uttered a sharp yelp, staggered and fell, with a bullet planted squarely between his eyes.

This was too much for the outlaw, presaging, as it did, the fate almost certainly in store for him if he remained. Hastily emptying his revolver, he uttered a faint cry of defiance, then turned and fled headlong down the stream.

"Quick, pard!—let ther dirty cuss go!" cried Orthodox, catching Old Dan by the shoulder and pulling him toward the water. "We've got ter git out ov this—they're too many fer us."

Rackhoss, with a muttered imprecation at the ill-luck pursuing them, shoved his revolver back into his belt, and the two again made their way to the middle of the stream.

"Which way?" Rackhoss asked, as they paused for a moment.

"Down," was the ready reply.

Not ten paces had they proceeded, however, when Rackhoss, who had again taken the lead, suddenly halted, uttering a sound expressive of intense satisfaction.

"This way, Orthodox," he muttered, hurriedly. "Hyar's our chaine, ef we're quick an' spry!"

The two men were in the dense shadow of a tree leaning almost directly across the stream. Just overhead was a mass of foliage, and into it Rackhoss drew himself, even as he spoke.

The next minute he was followed by Orthodox Pete.

"Ther higher we go, ther better, I reckon," Rackhoss continued, with due caution, as he proceeded upward. "Them derned hounds 'll hev a high time strikin' our trail, eh?"

Then came an hour of intense anxiety. Up and down the stream beat Hearne's followers, passing and repassing directly beneath the two fugitives, wholly unsuspecting of their presence, yet marveling at their mysterious disappearance.

"Et's no use, pards—they're too much fer us," cried one of the five, despondently, as they assembled under the overhanging bank of the stream, a short distance below the leaning tree. "Et will be daylight in another hour, an' that's our best bolt."

"Straight talk," assented Nickerson, briefly. "Dogs no good—see bime-by."

Slowly and wearily, the cohort took its way back to the point at which the dog had been killed, and there patiently awaited the break of day.

Then, just as the sun rose into the cloudless sky, the trail was discovered, nearly a mile below, running in almost a bee-line toward the camp of Yellow Dust.

"We're euchered, pards—et's more'n an hour old!" solemnly averred the oldest and most skillful trailer in the party, and, Injun Nickerson acquiescing, they abandoned the pursuit and hastened direct to the stronghold of Bishop Hearne.

In the office of the Silver Streak Mine sat James Orndare, his elbows resting upon the edge of his desk, his face buried in his hands.

Before him just as it had fallen from his nerveless fingers, lay a fragment of white paper, closely covered with writing.

He had entered the office a few minutes after daybreak. Just as the sun sent his first ray of golden light up the pass and through the window behind the mine-owner, some one tried the door, then knocked.

Orndare raised his head. His face was white and haggard.

"That must be Darrit," he muttered, rising and crossing to the door.

The surmise proved correct.

On the threshold stood the veteran detective. Into the office he strode, with a careless salutation, and helped himself to a seat opposite to that the mine-owner had vacated.

Orndare locked the door and returned to his desk.

"You are looking bad, this morning—played out and used up," the detective observed, scanning Orndare's face with critical eyes.

"Read that," was the terse response, and the mine-owner thrust into Darrit's hand the piece of paper.

It contained the following, penned in a cramped, irregular hand:

"JAMES ORNDARE:—You are hereby notified that your day of grace has expired. Unless the sum of \$15,000 is this day deposited, per the conditions specified in the terms of deliverance heretofore made you, your daughter is forever lost to you."

"THE BROTHERHOOD OF FORTUNE."

"All pith and point," remarked Bolly, when he had perused the message. "How was it delivered?"

"Pinned to the door with a bowie," Orndare replied. "It is high time for something decisive upon our part. Those infernal rascals are growing desperate."

"What have you to report this morning?"

"Simply that a decisive move will be made some time to-day—as soon, in fact, as Orthodox and Rackhoss return."

"Have Little Lightning and his men arrived?"

"Eight of them came in some time before daybreak, and are lying in wait a short distance out in the timber. Fine-looking lads they are, too—as daring as ever trailed a red or hunted an outlaw."

"Their leader is with them?"

"No, but momentarily expected. He and his brother were detained."

Orndare sighed.

"Speak of his Satanic Majesty!" ejaculated Bolly, quickly gaining his feet. "Here comes Grim. Get me out of sight."

"What can it mean? Do you connect his coming with this message from the 'Brotherhood of Fortune?'"

"Two and two usually foot up four, and—Gideon Grim isn't up early for nothing!" Bolly returned with a grimace. "Hide me, quick, and don't betray my presence."

"That closet there will answer your purpose—you can leave the door ajar."

It took the veteran but a moment to stow himself away. Orndare unlocked the office door, then returned to his seat to await the coming of Grim.

That oily individual was not long in making his appearance.

"Good-morning, Brother Orndare!" he saluted in his smoothest tones, as he threw open the door and walked into the office. "I doubted that I should be so fortunate as to find you here at this early hour."

"I trust, then, that you find yourself agreeably disappointed," was the even-toned response. "Have a seat."

The Mayor of Yellow Dust sat down, removed and rubbed his spectacles briskly.

"Yes, I turned out early this morning, as I am going over to Pioche on business," he began, with a certain nervousness that did not escape the keen black eyes of the mine-owner, "in fact, to bank a considerable sum of money."

"Yes?"

"Yes. I have decided, however, to try to close up the deal I opened with you a few days ago before I start."

"You still wish to purchase the Silver Streak?"

"Exactly."

"The mine is not for sale."

Grim put on his glasses. His hands trembled, and it was evident that he was flurried.

"Consider, Orndare—consider," he expostulated, dropping a smooth, round hand on each knee and and gazing straight at the mine-owner. "I've the solid cash right here in my pocket—every cent the mine is worth. And you need the money, too—badly! Remember the fate hanging over your daughter!"

The last vestige of color fled from Orndare's face. In an instant he was upon his feet.

"You infernal scoundrel!" he cried, his voice low and intense, his eyes blazing wrathfully; "go back to your confederates and say to them that, if so much as a hair of my child's head is harmed, I shall never rest till just and due punishment has been meted out to every man of the unlawful and unholy cabal!"

"You are mad, sir—mad as a March hare!" sputtered Grim, springing back in alarm.

"Mad, but it is a madness with a method," quoth a new voice, directly behind the villainous official, and Bolly Darrit stepped forth from his place of concealment, a cocked revolver in his hand.

"Surrender, Gid Grim. I demand it in the name of the law!"

"On what charge?" faltered the culprit, facing about and paling and flushing by turns.

"Abduction and conspiracy to defraud!"

Utterly unnerved, Grim quietly submitted his wrists to the manacles, and was then led back to the chair.

"Desperate straits require desperate meas-

ures," quoth Darrit. "We must next secure Pepper. Can you entice him here?"

Before Orndare could reply, the door was opened and Marshal Pepper entered the office.

"Good-mornin', gents," he accosted, as he carelessly closed the door.

"Good-mornin', Mr. Pepper," returned Orndare, with an icy smile.

Then the marshal's eyes fell upon the rotund form of Bolly Darrit, and he made a move as if to draw a weapon.

The veteran was too quick for him, and within a minute he was as helpless as the mayor.

After a brief consultation the prisoners were gagged and conducted into a small apartment in the rear of the office proper, where they were locked up in company with Major Menace.

On their return to the outer room Orndare and Darrit found in waiting a slender, blue-eyed, brown-haired lad, armed to the teeth and garbed as a plainsman.

"Kent Kane!" ejaculated the detective, rushing forward with open arms, his twinkling blue eyes beaming with delight.

"None other, I assure you, Bolly," the youth returned, as he evaded the threatened bearlike hug by warmly clasping the outstretched hands.

"And this is James Orndare?"

"It is," replied the mine-owner.

"Then, sir, you are the man I am looking for. I am direct from the stronghold of Bishop Hearne, and I have news of your missing daughter!"

CHAPTER XVII.

CONCLUSION.

WHEN Bishop Hearne arrived at the bottom of the stairway, after his brief interview with Millie Orndare, he came upon a group of his followers surrounding the senseless form of Jerry Sulkan.

"What's wrong now?"

"Sulkan has been set upon and beaten well-nigh to death," replied one of the group.

"By whom?"

"None of us knows. He was found just back of the house, just as ye see 'im."

"A drunken row, I'll be bound," snarled Hearne, passing on toward the library.

Dark and wrathful were the glances that followed him.

"Pards, things aire lookin' shaky fer the Brotherhood of Fortune," asseverated a shrewd-looking rascal, as the library door closed.

"Hearne is too near drunk ter attend ter business, an' jest now—"

He shook his head sagely, ominously.

"Atween us, pards, t'other side ov the range aire safer a durned sight, jest now!" another muttered, with a quick, cautious glance at his fellows.

"The ole man hes too many irons in the fire. Hyar's goin' ter vamose!"

"An' hyar," an' hyar!" echoed others of the party, and then, in a silent, subdued sort of way, they gently lifted Sulkan from the floor and carried him to his quarters.

In the mean time Bishop Hearne had entered his library and flung himself into his comfortable leather chair.

There came a rap at the door, and, in response to the summons to enter, Captain Jason Marks walked in.

"Well?" queried the bishop, half-rising.

"We failed," was the curt reply, with a gesture at his bandaged throat.

For a moment the bishop was speechless. Then he launched forth in an abusive tirade.

Captain Marks listened in silence, a grim smile hovering over his lips, until Hearne had ended, then, without a word, he quitted the library.

A few minutes later Injun Nickerson glided silently into the room and confronted the bishop.

Hearne did not stir from the depths of his chair, but eyed the red-skin suspiciously.

"No ketch 'um—find water an' fool hounds!" tersely reported the Indian.

"Get out, you worthless dog!" thundered the Mormon, quivering with rage. "Get away—don't let me see you! You are all in league with my enemies!"

Injun Nickerson quietly withdrew, and the bishop was again alone.

"They are undoing me, the curs!" he grated, again and again, in his drunken wrath. "But I'll beat 'em yet! Steele Skinwell will be with us, by and by!"

And thus he sat during the greater part of the forenoon—one moment despondent and wrathful, the next fiendishly exultant.

Finally, a strange sound reached his ears—the rumbling of wheels and the tramp of many horses.

In a trice he was upon his feet, startled, agitated. Crossing to a window overlooking the narrow valley, he peered forth.

What a scene greeted his eyes!

A scene that might well carry terror and despair to his wretched soul!

Winding across the valley, led by Captain Marks, and bearing with them everything portable of value, were his followers.

They were deserting, to a man!

Stolidly, as if bereft of the power of motion, Bishop Hearne watched the cavalcade out of sight.

"They are going through the upper pass," he gritted, as he turned toward the house. "They have robbed my vengeance of half its sting, but it shall be swift and sure, nevertheless!"

At that juncture, he was startled by a ringing hail.

"By heavens! it is Steele Skinwell!" he ejaculated, with a breath of relief, as he gazed earnestly down the valley.

Two minutes later, the red-bearded Mormon sprung from his dripping horse and confronted Hearne, with the salutation:

"Well, bishop, I am here."

Hearne made no reply. He was gazing anxiously at the lower pass.

"Who are these men?" he cried, suddenly, his hands dropping swiftly to the revolvers in his belt.

"Friends of mine," was the reply. "See here, bishop—don't act a fool! I hold the drop!"

Hearne started. The muzzle of a revolver stared him in the face.

"Who are you?" he asked, hoarsely.

The bogus bishop threw aside the false beard and wig, revealing the white, stern face of Kent Kane.

"One of Little Lightning's followers!" ejaculated Hearne, in dismay.

"His brother," amended Kent.

"I've played a hard game, and lost," continued the bishop, in an undertone. "But, even in defeat I can rob them of vengeance!"

He raised his hand to his mouth. A slight crackling, grinding sound followed.

Kent sprung forward and plucked the revolvers from his belt, just as the Invincibles rode up and halted.

"Ha! it is Little Lightning!" greeted Hearne, staggering blindly. "Had I killed him last night, this would not have been!"

"Orndare and Carson, too, and reconciled!" he continued, just audibly. "Ye gods! how utterly, how miserably, have I failed!"

"How miserably, indeed, St. Leger Clarkson," uttered Orndare, dismounting, just as the bishop sunk down in a heap.

"How miserably, indeed, Old Man Keene!" echoed Little Lightning.

With an effort, Hearne lifted his head and motioned Orndare and Carson to approach.

"I've done my level best, and failed!" he gasped, his eyes shifting from face to face. "Be merciful, I beg you, and spare my son, Major Menace!"

Those were the plotter's last words. The next minute he was dead—poisoned by his own hand!

With the death of Bishop Hearne, the power of the unscrupulous Mormon cohort was broken, Millie Orndare was restored to her father, and a better one dawned in Yellow Dust.

Lewis Carson at once purchased a half-interest in the Silver Streak Mine. Rachel and Millie became inseparable, and, in the end, sisters-in-law—the first becoming the bride of fortunate David Kane, the other, of the equally-lucky Kent.

The pursuit of the fleeing Brotherhood of Fortune, although vigorously pushed by Old Bolly Darrit, Dan Rackhoss and Orthodox Pete, together with the Prairie Invincibles, was barren of results. The demoralized outlaws scattered, to reassemble and reorganize later on.

On the return of Orndare's party to Yellow Dust, it was found, too, that Major Menace, Gideon Grim and Marshal Pepper, doubtless aided by allies in the camp, had effected their escape, leaving no clew by which they could be trailed.

The only remaining captive was the unfortunate Steele Skinwell. Against him no case could be made, and he was accordingly released.

Thus, the malefactors escaped, almost without punishment; but, relieved by the death of their arch-foe, and made happy by the restoration of Millie and the reuniting of friendship's broken bands, our friends could well say:

"All's well that ends well."

THE END.

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